Guidelines for cultural exchanges with Korea

Cultural exchanges, both for students travelling to Korea and for those hosting students from Korea, can provide a rich, cultural experience. Participating students not only gain an increased knowledge, understanding and appreciation of another culture and lifestyle, they also gain an understanding of and appreciation for diversity. The most effective cultural exchanges are those in which students build personal relationships, often making life-long friends. Cultural exchanges also add a global perspective to the classroom curriculum.

Cultural exchanges can sometimes create cultural dilemmas for participating students, who may find themselves in new and confusing situations. This document has been developed to support participants and their families in developing an understanding of lifestyles and customs in Korea. Whether you are travelling to Korea or hosting a student from Korea, this information may help you gain the maximum benefit from the experience. The information provided is not exhaustive, and is intended as a guide only.

Greetings

It is the custom in Korea for people to bow when they meet. They give a slight bow to those who are senior to themselves or to strangers, often shaking hands at the same time. Supporting your right forearm with your left hand when shaking hands is a sign of respect. In shopping centres, particularly in department stores, the shop attendants will give a deep bow to customers as they enter the store. Students also bow when passing their teachers or at the beginning and end of the lesson. Korean people frequently bow when leaving, and younger people will also wave, in a side-to-side motion. Kissing and hugging are less common in Korea than in Australia.

Names

Korean names consist of a family name and a given name. Traditionally, the family name is stated first, followed by the given name. Middle names are uncommon. Traditional first names are usually derived from two Chinese characters, although the pronunciation may be different in Korean. One of the characters (first or second, depending on the family) is shared by all people in a family’s generation, making it common for siblings and cousins to have the same characters in their names. The other character is unique to the individual. This tradition is more common for boys. For example, if a boy is called Hong Gee, his brother may be Hong Jik and his cousin may be Hong Geun.

Men and women keep their own names when they marry, although the children will usually take the father’s surname. Koreans do not use the names of people who are older than them. Instead, they use titles that describe the relationships or kinship between and among people, e.g. ‘older brother’.
Except among close friends, adults do not use first names to address each other. Family names with titles, such as ‘teacher’ or ‘manager’, are used with the honorific suffix *nim* to signify respect. For example, a teacher who has a family name of Kim would be addressed *Kim seon saeng nim* – *Kim* (family name) *seon saeng* (teacher) *nim* (honorific suffix).

### Interactions (including non-verbal language)
Koreans lower their eyes when speaking to an older person, as a sign of respect. When making eye contact, the more senior person may look directly at the junior person, while the more junior looks downward. When a person is reprimanded by someone senior to them, eyes are lowered to express an apology. Koreans tend to ask direct or personal questions, especially about a person’s age, as age determines the nature of the relationship and the form of speech required.

It is common for people in Korea of the same gender to have more physical contact than in Australia. For example, it is common for male school students to put their arms around each other’s shoulders or slap each other’s backs and for female school students to hold hands or link their arms when walking together. Pointing is done with the entire hand, palm down. Beckoning is done in the same way, moving the hand downwards.

### Housing
Korea is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with most people in cities living in high-rise apartment complexes. Shoes are not worn in Korean houses.

Traditionally, Korean people sit and sleep on the floor but Western-style furnishings have become more common, including lounges and beds. Most apartments have central heating in winter and air-conditioning in summer.

In Korea, it is acceptable for the whole bathroom to be wet. The floor of the bathroom is designed slightly lower than rest of the house, so that water can drain easily when sprayed around the room. Rubber slippers are provided just inside the bathroom to ensure that the user is not standing in water. The towels used are similar to Australian hand towels and are used for different parts of the body. Covers are placed over the toilet paper to prevent the roll from getting wet. Many Korean toilets are very high-tech, with bidet and drying facilities, avoiding the need for toilet paper altogether.

### Eating and drinking
Traditionally, Korean food is not served in courses. Each person receives their own serving of rice and a bowl of soup, but the remainder of the food is placed in serving dishes in the centre of the table, to be shared by everyone. It is also common to share some larger soups. Spoons are used to eat rice and soup, and chopsticks are used for other foods. In Korea, it is considered impolite to pick up your rice bowl or soup bowl from the table.

The oldest or most senior person is served first and is also the one who starts eating.
first.
Out of courtesy and respect, mealtimes in Korea are not noisy affairs. Quiet conversations are more appropriate. Traditionally, conversation was discouraged while eating but this is changing with new generations.
Burping cautiously with a covered mouth is acceptable but blowing your nose at the dinner table is considered rude. Many Korean men make slurping sounds when they eat noodles and soup or drink water, but women tend to eat quietly.
When dining out, the host usually insists on paying the bill. Sharing the bill is seen as improper, although this is also changing with new generations.
A wider range of foreign food is available in Korea. Western-style foods such as pizzas and hamburgers are popular.

### Families

Korean society follows the philosophy of Confucianism. One of the core values of Confucianism is filial piety and respect for one’s elders. These basic lessons are taught to Koreans from childhood.

Family welfare is much more important than the needs of the individual. Familial responsibilities include looking after elderly parents and grandparents. Respect for all elders is an important tradition in Korean culture.

Traditionally, extended families live together, and the grandfather is the head of the family. Today, smaller nuclear families are common but the same values of filial duty remain.

In general, family life in contemporary Korea can be limited due to busy lifestyles. Fathers tend to have long working hours and mothers typically carry responsibility for all decisions in the household. Children are often busy, studying until late.

### Schooling

Most Koreans place a very high value on education and a great importance on academic achievement. Thus, education is viewed as crucial for success and competition is consequently intense.

Korean students emphasise accuracy over fluency when learning a foreign language. Whilst students may appear shy in class, their reluctance to ask questions and respond may be based on a desire to answer accurately or not at all.

In Korea, English is now a compulsory subject for children from the third year of primary school. Many children also live abroad for a period of time to learn English. Traditionally teachers are respected by students and their parents. They have a close relationship with their students, particularly in high school, where there is a homeroom teacher for each class. Students spend long hours at school and put in extra study time for exams, so teachers have the responsibility of looking after their students’ welfare and study habits. Korean students address their teacher as seon saeng nim (‘teacher’, with an honorific suffix).
**Gift-giving**

Koreans tend to offer some initial resistance when they receive a gift by expressing humility (the equivalent of ‘You didn’t need to buy us this gift!’).

When giving and receiving gifts, use both hands. Gifts are usually not opened in front of the giver, however it may be helpful to ask the giver if you can open it.

Gift-giving occasions and reasons in Korea include: Expressions of thanks; during *Chuseok* (Harvest Moon Day) and New Year’s Day; when visiting other people’s houses on invitation.

For people visiting Korea, it is appropriate for them to bring souvenirs from their own country as gifts.

**Religion**

Korea has a diversity of religious traditions, with Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity the most common.

Confucianism is also a social and ethical philosophy permeating all of Korean society, which stresses duty, loyalty, honour, filial piety, respect for age and seniority, and sincerity.

Whatever their religion, most Korean families follow Confucian traditions when holding ceremonies, e.g. memorial services on the anniversary of a relatives’ death.

**Levels of formality**

Due to the principles of Confucianism, Korean culture is a highly authoritarian, paternalistic system. The emphasis on education and respect for one’s elders also come from the teaching of Confucius.

Korean society is structured according to seniority and status and people’s speech behaviour reflects the hierarchical relationship. People are aware of the age and position of those they are speaking to and adapt their language to suit.

A variety of honorific forms and humble expressions are used according to the speaker’s relationship with the addressee. For example, one uses informal speech to children and friends, and formal speech with honorific form to older people to express respect.

**Manner and demeanour**

Korean society is very polite, and respect and privacy are extremely important.

It is impolite to wear sunglasses as it can be interpreted as having something to hide. It is also impolite to drink alcohol directly in front of a person who is significantly older. As a sign of respect, you should turn slightly away from the person when you take a sip.

Smiling is for friends and family, or for people with whom a Korean person has a personal relationship. As such, it would be unusual to smile at passers-by. Openly showing affection in public, except towards children, is also uncommon.

As Korea is more crowded than Australia, a Korean person’s concept of space may be smaller than our own. Bumping into others, standing closely and talking closely are all inevitable, and no apology is necessary.
### Transport

On buses, you can pay fares with coins or with a bus card. In Korea, if a person secures a seat, it is customary to offer to hold heavy bags (not handbags) of those standing, or offer the seat to an elderly person. Korean transport is designed to hold the maximum amount of passengers with more standing room than seats. The easiest way to get around major cities in Korea is to take the subway. Stations, lines, and transfer points are all identified in English. The fare depends on the distance, however it is comparatively cheaper than Australia. Be prepared for extreme crowds during peak periods.

### Shopping/bargaining

Light bargaining is acceptable in markets or smaller retail outlets, however aggressive bargaining common in some Asian countries is considered impolite.

### Concept of ‘saving face’

In order to save face, Koreans may be reluctant to ask questions and clarify points during meetings, and they may prefer to check through the written material after the meetings. Since there is a tendency to say ‘yes’ to questions without clear understandings, phrasing a question that requires a direct response is important to gain a clear answer. However, these mannerisms are individual and younger generations in modern Korean society are more direct and open. To avoid embarrassment, you should not criticise people in public. If a problem arises, you should discuss it in private.