

**Exchange university**

NTU - National Taiwan University

Degree programme

Masters in Software Engineering of Distributed Systems

Exchange in Taiwan

Before departure

I had always wanted to go for a semester abroad but my exchange during my bachelor degree was canceled due to covid. As a result, I did not wanna miss out during my Masters again. I think it's a great opportunity to get to know a different university and culture. I chose Taiwan because I really wanted to go to an east Asian country and experience life in a big city there. My choices were South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. KTH did not seem to have a partner university in Seoul and the semester times in Japan did not really align with the ones in Sweden. I ended up choosing Taiwan because the fall semester aligned perfectly (late August - late December). Moreover, it seemed very exciting because I did not know a lot of people that had been to Taiwan before whereas a lot of people seemed to have visited Japan or Korea. Taipei felt more novel.

I had to apply for a Visitor Visa in Taiwan which I got from the Taipei Representative Office in Hamburg, Germany. I know there is one in Stockholm as well where you can get the visa. I got a multiple entry visa for 6 months. Apart from that, I got a few vaccinations beforehand (e.g. Hepatitis).

Upon arrival

I arrived on the Sunday before the introduction week at NTU started (late August). In the first week there are a few introductory events for international students at NTU. They are organised by both the whole school and each department individually. These are great events to meet other international students and make friends.

The school has a lot of student unions and organises a big club fair where they present all different clubs. The fair is interesting to go to because some of the clubs are very different from what you would have in Europe. I did not end up joining any club in the end as spots in a lot of the clubs were limited.

Financials

KTH provided a little bit of financial support for exchange students outside of Europe. This was enough to cover the flights. Apart from that, KTH also provided health insurance abroad. We have heard from many students from other countries that that was not the case for them. Otherwise, I did not receive any additional scholarships.

In general, life is a lot cheaper than in Sweden but you also end up having higher standards. As a result spendings is quite similar I would say. Meals on campus can be purchased for 30 SEK on average. Prices off campus are similar but a little more expensive because you don't have a student discount. This is great because you can eat a lot of good affordable food. On the other hand, you are also forced to eat out because it is not common to cook in Taipei and super markets are very expensive. This means you will eat out 2-3 times a day which adds up over time.

Accommodation

I got accommodation privately, off campus with a couple of friends I had known from Europe. We lived right across the street from campus. In general, I would recommend living as close to campus as possible (mainly Daan or Gonguan districts). We paid a little more because it was private accommodation though.

In general rent is still cheaper than Sweden. The cheapest options are the student dorms. There are single dorms which are quite convenient but I did not get into. They also have a lot of shared dorms where you share a room with 3 other people. I did not apply for those even though they are by far the cheapest option.

Housing standards are lower than in Europe but still pretty good. Make sure to get air conditioning as it gets really hot in the summer. Also make sure to not come here if you have a phobia of cockroaches. They are very common across Taiwan and you will definitely see them occasionally (on the streets at night, in houses or at university). This is because of the humid climate.

University and studies

NTU is quite big and by far the best university in Taiwan. Whenever you would mention to locals that you studied at NTU, they would be very impressed. The university has a big, American-style campus very central in Taipei. Campus life is great as there are a lot of food places and sports facilities (more later).

NTU offers studies in most areas I would say. I was part of the electrical engineering and computer science department which had a lot of exchange students. Taipei also has another technical university. Some of the courses are shared between them and NTU.

I would say that student life is more centered around the campus than it is at KTH. On the other hand, I felt like studies were also more time intensive. A lot of the assignments are more focused on giving the students a lot of work rather than focusing on transferring/gaining knowledge. I felt like I did not really have the time to fully learn certain topics and do deep dives because I was too busy finishing assignments. KTH feels like it focuses more on actually understanding the topics and applying the knowledge (which I prefer).

I took 5 courses at NTU and had classes 4 days a week. Outside of class I spent a lot of time working on homework, assignments and projects. I did not have as many exams as expected but ended up having a lot of projects instead. Overall, the workload was very high and I spent a lot of time at the library. A lot of the other exchange students from other countries had less work but it seemed like all exchange students from Sweden were pretty busy studying most of the time. I think this is due to the fact that the translation of credits does not seem to work out properly (especially in the masters level). It seemed like the local master students took less courses/credits than we had to take. I also heard from other European universities that their credit translation is more lenient than the one from KTH.

I picked all my courses in English. NTU provides a lot of Chinese language courses but I had heard before that they were really time consuming. That is why I decided not to take any language course. My exchange student friends, I met in Taipei, confirmed the high workload of the Chinese language courses.

Courses

I attended 5 courses at NTU. Each was worth 3 local credits (6 ECTS) which translates to a full study workload. If a course is 3 credits, there will be 3h of lectures each week. Usually, each course only has one lecture block which means that you have all 3 hours of lecture in one go. Most of these lectures do not take many breaks either. Paying attention for the full 3 hours of lectures was pretty hard especially if you have multiple courses a day.

The 5 courses I took are:

Machine Learning: Very math heavy and time consuming. Biweekly homeworks that mostly focus on proofs. I did not learn as much as I had wished (especially about applying ML approaches).

Virtual Machines: Very unique course that you probably would not be able to study at many other universities. Difficult and time consuming but interesting and very fair professor.

Introduction of Biomedical Informatics: Very interesting. A lot of guest lectures from people in the industry. Fairly low workload.

Frontiers of Artificial Intelligence of Things: Course mainly focuses on a project in the AIoT field. Apart from that, it contains a lot of guest lectures from different professors that present their latest research. A lot of homework based on the guest lecturer, that can vary from very easy to very time consuming.

Python Programming Foundations: Introduction course for Python. I have heard from other students that it is very hard to follow the course if you have not programmed beforehand.

NTU has only a limited selection of available Computer Science courses in English. Even if you find courses that you are interested in you need to be lucky to get a spot. The courses vary in size very much. Machine Learning for example was designed for 400 students whereas other courses only took 20 students per semester.

I found it quite hard to find course information about courses at NTU before coming to Taiwan. This was mainly because it was hard to find information in English and the course website is very difficult to navigate. Moreover, the course website only shows courses from last year but it is not guaranteed that these courses will be held in the upcoming semester too.

I found some really nice courses beforehand which would have fit perfectly into my specialisation at KTH. I assumed that they would also be held during my exchange semester but that turned out not to be the case because the professor was on a sabbatical. Moreover, after arriving in Taiwan and actually applying for courses it turned out that I could not apply to a lot of courses that were related to data science because they were only available for students in one specific program. This made it harder to find 5 courses that were held in English and related to my degree.

After being at NTU for a couple of months I realized that the passing grade for courses was 70% for master students. This was a bit of a shock because at my home university it is 60% which is significantly easier to reach. Nonetheless, the grade distribution at NTU is very different. Everything above 80% is an A grade (A+, A and A-) and between 70-80% is graded as a B apparently. This means that it is fairly easy to get good grades here but harder to pass courses.

City and country

Taipei is a really nice city which has a lot to offer: temples, night markets, modern skyscrapers, arcade halls etc. Taipei is close to the beach and also surrounded by mountains. It is very easy and fast to get into nature.

I would recommend choosing a university in Taipei if you wanna go for an exchange in Taiwan. I found it to be by far the most interesting city in Taiwan. I also met a lot of exchange students from other cities in Taiwan that would end up traveling to Taipei almost every weekend.

The climate can be quite extreme. The summer months are very hot and humid (up to 38 degrees). A lot of spaces are outside and indoor spaces mostly have air conditioning. The fall was very rainy and the winter got quite cold, as most houses have no heating system.

Taiwan is hit by typhoons quite often. I experienced 2 typhoons while I was at NTU.

Leisure and social activities

NTU campus has a lot of different sports facilities (2 different swimming pools, basketball, tennis, volleyball courts, football & baseball fields, gyms etc.). They are all very affordable and great to try out new sports.

Moreover, Taiwan is great for hiking and you can go on surfing day trips from Taipei.

It is very easy to meet other exchange students and make new friends.

Sustainability

Sustainability as a topic was not very prevalent in Taiwan overall.

Other recommendations and observations

I highly recommend hiking Yushan/Jade Mountain, the highest mountain in Taiwan. You need a specific permit to go on the hike which is usually booked out months in advance. If you are interested in going as well, don't forget to apply early on.