

My Internationalization Journey

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Table of Contents

Cover Letter	3
Internationalization in a Decade: My Journey	6

Cover Letter

My internationalization journey I believe touches upon all of the EUCI Learning Outcomes and has allowed me to develop into a more understanding, respectful and open minded individual. While this rather new phenomena has come about from the emergence of globalization, I was lucky enough to experience it myself and would like to share more about the intricate ways it has affected me.

The Intercultural learning outcome was touched upon by my experience in the International Baccalaureate, where I got to partake into a great mix of different cultures. I have learned how other cultures approach similar issues, I have learned how to respect others and the importance of multiculturalism in a learning environment. This intercultural learning environment helped resolve issues and create a welcoming environment for any newcomer into the program. The International Baccalaureate, as I believe other similar international school programs, are essential in paving the way for a globalized world, where understanding and diversified communication are pivotal in creating a peaceful environment. Straying away from my very uni-cultural public school in Romania was a difficult task to undertake at first, but partaking in an intercultural educational system was a unique experience which shaped me into who I am today - looking back on it now, my opinion is that every school should strive to promote more intercultural communication and problem solving, as it leads to less rifts in society, and beyond, aids our ability to deal with personal issues - compromise, communication, understanding are all things that we should strive to improve in, something which an intercultural education aims to achieve.

The Intersectoral learning outcome was touched upon by my experience in moving to Belgium and beginning my studies in VUB's Social Sciences program. I chose the program first and foremost because my international experience in the International Baccalaureate kickstarted my interest into the field of social sciences - dealing with the world's issues. I believe that in some way, the international experience I've had and the intercultural class environment I had helped me see that there are issues I may not be able to see without truly opening up communication with other cultures and hearing how they see certain issues. I would have not been so aware of certain issues in our society like racial inequality if I had stayed in a uni-cultural school because the dialogue would most likely have not been brought up and that area would be shrouded, but my intercultural learning helped mitigate that, and motivated me into choosing social sciences as my area of study. I believe this program allows me to further use my internationalization in analyzing issues from a multicultural perspective. Without my internationalization journey, I do not believe I would

have chosen this program, and more so, my internationalization journey is what allows me to give a unique perspective on issues in society as well as be more open minded of ideas that oppose my own. I realize how my international journey affected different areas of my life, including as I have listed, my higher education program, as well as other various areas of my life.

The Challenge-based and Reflective learning outcome were touched upon by an experience in Belgium which I embarked on which was joining the international organization AIESEC. AIESEC is an organization which sends students abroad either as volunteers or on professional internships, and sometimes for older students as teachers, but I have mainly dealt with the first two areas. During AIESEC fairs I had to speak to others, speak publicly, in front of classrooms, in front of individuals at fairs, and I was able to apply my internationalization experience in encouraging people to take the first step in their own internationalization journey. I had to interact with different people of different cultures, different experiences, some who have been international students their whole lives and some who were curious, some who have never been anywhere else but Belgium, and having learned how to interact with different cultures, how to be respectful allowed me to be more effective, and successfully encouraged some to take the first leap into that same journey I took too long ago. This challenge encouraged me to be reflective because I reflected thoroughly on my internationalization journey, the lessons I learned, the challenges and overall what I could use to encourage others to either become a volunteer or start their internship somewhere abroad. I thought back on what elements stuck out to me, how certain interactions in my past helped me better myself now and have concluded that the overall environment, the discussions and the openness I've experience in the International Baccalaureate as well as my social sciences program and Belgium's diverse demographic as a whole helped me approach issues from a multicultural perspective rather than a uni-cultural one, where understanding and compromise is at the core of the problem-solving process. Furthermore, I concluded that each individual must undertake their own internationalization journey to be able to truly understand the benefits themselves which led me to the aforementioned organization, to try to promote to other fellow students to take that first leap into their own internationalization journey.

As globalization continues, I believe that an internationalization journey will become essential in helping aid the functioning of society - we can no longer simply view issues from a uni-cultural perspective, it is important as a growing multicultural society to attempt to understand these issues from different perspectives, from the eyes of cultures which might not be our own - understanding and open communication will pave the way for a better

tomorrow. I am thankful for my journey thus far, and I believe that I have become a better person because of it. Though it may be obscure to me now as life is always uncertain, I am excited for the road ahead and especially excited to see in which other areas will my international life take me, what other lessons there are to learn and how I can further improve as an individual.

Internationalization in a Decade: My Journey

As I begin reflecting internally on my life and my international journey as a whole, I realize that internationalization is much more than just a standardized process, much more than just a new-age phenomena, but rather, a way of life. Throughout the last 10 years of my life I have become familiar with the concept of internationalization and have understood its importance not only in my life but the world as a whole. I aim, with this essay, to summarize my experiences, what I've learned from them and how they've aided me in my personal development - a brief overview into my journey of internationalization.

When I was younger, I could hardly begin to imagine what crucial role internationalization would play in my life, the sole idea of something being 'international' was but a passing thought. I often imagined that my life would mainly revolve around my home country of Romania, where I would most likely pursue a higher education in. I came in contact with individuals, who would end up opening up my mind up to the idea that my world could expand past the borders of my own country, and in some way, that sowed the seeds of curiosity to see what goes on beyond - but, it remained just a thought. My biggest step, which began my international journey, was my move to Slovenia. In 2012 I left my home country of Romania, along with my parents, to move to a relatively small country I had yet to hear about, which people often confused with Slovakia, and here I was enrolled into an international school. In the summer of 2012 I was tasked with learning relatively adequate English in order to participate in classes, and it would be a lie to say that I wasn't absolutely scared. To note, at this point in my life, at the age of 12, the only language I knew was Romanian, and the only English I had learned before moving was the basics - which was not enough to be able to bare the syllabus of the International Baccalaureate (IB) system I was now enrolled in. In two months, using YouTube videos as my source of English learning through videos on video games and the likes, I went from having to repeat at least four times in my head "Hello, may I have an ice cream?" So I wouldn't embarrass myself, to being able to make friends on the first day of school.

Making friends wasn't too difficult, but it was definitely the hardest I had to work for in socializing in my life up to that point. Not only was my English not really good enough to be able to talk to my friends about the video games I liked to the fullest extent, but seeing cultural differences for the first time was truly something I had to get used to. Having spent 12 years of my life surrounded by people who spoke the same language as I did, who looked as I did, who all shared similar views and had a rather closed-off view about the world, with the international sphere being at the back end of priorities, I realized that I had a lot of

learning ahead of me to do. I realized that after a few months, the way I thought began to shift - no longer concerned solely on my home country of Romania, but picking up bits of cultural knowledge from various different cultures and feeling my mind opening up to the world around me. I vividly remember discussions that my class would have where we would speak about our childhood, and I was beyond shocked to learn how different cultures influenced different areas of our lives, especially parenting, since up to that point I had only known really one style of parenting - the one's my parents applied to me, which was rather similar to what would be considered the norm in Romania. Often, I would end up gasping and asking "Your parents allowed you to do THAT?" And being replied with an, "Of course, it's pretty normal where I'm from!". Looking back on this experience, I believe that collection of different cultures and experiences that made its way into our International School helped me realize that I could do things differently, not confined by the cultural borders of my own country, that I could take what I believed was right, and applying it into my own life.

Moving to my late teen years, I came to realize, that while I had become rather adapted to an international environment, seeing individuals from all across the world communicate and work together, the world faced challenges and rifts based on this multicultural aspect that I embraced fully. Becoming interested with these challenges, how to connect different cultures, how to make it work all smoothly, just like I had seen in my own class, was fascinating, and I decided to take the next step in my internationalization journey, one that combined my multicultural learning with my interest in the problems that are being faced by our society today - I moved to Belgium and enrolled into a Social Sciences program. I realized that one of the biggest challenges in the world was figuring out how to connect all different cultures, how to make the system work while compromising on what we believed to be right. I could no longer see things from a purely Romanian perspective, I had to go beyond, I had to look at it from an international perspective. Putting myself in the shoes of others, trying to recall from my own experiences and interactions with people of various cultures how to approach an issue, was something fascinating. My studies allowed for me to connect that which I had learned, to take from the environment that made me who I am now, and use that experience as a way to better the world. Enrolling into a university which encompassed these International multicultural challenges was one thing, but moving to a country which I had no roots in, where I had no family in, where I was for the first time in my life, truly alone, was daunting... but at the same time... quite exciting. Being one of the most international and multicultural countries in Europe, Belgium allowed me to develop more of my social understanding, and I was able to socialize easier using the international perspective I had gained through my experience. I now knew how to approach individuals of

different cultures, how to make them feel comfortable and I learned to respect the differences, rather than take them as a negative.

In Belgium is where I joined an organization where I got to further apply what I had learned, but to others around me rather than personally. In October 2021, I joined AIESEC, an international organization that focuses on sending students abroad on exchange experiences encompassing volunteer work and internships, with a sole focus on an international experience. I knew that AIESEC was good for me because who else could speak better about the benefits of an international experience than someone who had spent the last ten years of their life having exactly that - an international experience. I served as a promoter of the experiences the organization offered and I participated in various fairs which required me to sell the idea of internationalization to students. I sat down for a while and thought about what I could tell someone to convince them to embrace the idea of an international experience, and I looked back on my life and thought about the lessons I took from moving to Slovenia, from the International Baccalaureate, from moving to Belgium and I realized that all of it made me into a better individual. Seeing how others thought allowed me to better approach others, it allowed to be more respectful and tolerant of differences, and this helped not only in an international environment, but in my day to day work. In life, you will always have to deal with differences, you will always have to compromise in one way or another, so learning how to embrace it, and take them as positives rather than negatives is essential for the betterment of one's life, and it helped better me. I noticed that more ignorant individuals who were quick to judge others and demonize other cultures were individuals who never truly had an international upbringing, or participated in international environments, where internationalization, rather than being an experiences worth cherishing was more of a fear, fear of losing one's culture, but all that I feel after a decade of an international experience is not a loss of my own Romanian culture within me, but rather an enhanced understanding of the importance and uniqueness of my own culture on a global scale.

Embracing other cultures and their uniqueness, opposite to the notion of losing your own, beyond enhances your understanding and appreciation of it. Without internationalization, 8 from my perspective, it is quite difficult to truly analyze the different aspects of your culture. I observed that after I began delving in my experience that I was able to point to the differences in culture, about how we approach the same issue but from a different cultural perspective. Before my international journey I just accepted my Romanian culture as merely a normal thing, only when I became an international student I began asking the why of it all - why did we, in our Romanian culture, do things a certain way, as opposed to another culture? That question motivated me to learn more about my own culture, not only other

cultures, but the history of my own country, about the history of where I came from - it motivated me way more than any history class that I ever had at a public school in Romania - because to me there was no reason why I should know about it in the first place, it was just the standard. Instead of being driven away from my own culture towards others in my international journey, I had become more curious about it, I had become closer to where I was from because I realized, just like every other culture, that it is unique in its own way, and although I may not live there anymore, it doesn't mean that I shouldn't be aware of how certain cultural elements affect my perspectives and views of the world. Thus, my introspection into my international past served as a way to help others see the benefits of it too. At the AIESEC fairs I would go up to individuals and I wouldn't tell them lies, I wouldn't try to give a false perspective of how an international experience could help you, all I did was tell them about my own, and how it helped me become a better person, how it helped me appreciate what I have more, by embracing others. Individuals became more interested once they weren't told a generic standardized tale about how internationalization is important for x, y and z philosophical reasons, but rather, real life experiences. It is often easy to get lost in concepts, returning to the aforementioned question of the why of it all - without a reason for you to do or learn something, it is often hard to find any motivation to do so, and the same goes for elements which are outside of a purely academic or career environment. I would have never truly appreciated the importance of internationalization if someone told me simply that it is important, but rather, I had to experience it for myself, I had to go through that journey on my own and see for myself what there was to learn, and that is the exact same approach I encouraged potential volunteers or internship applicants, because how can you truly know the benefits of something, how do you know how something will affect you until you do it yourself? The same way you wouldn't be able to tell how beautiful Hawaii is without really being there - sure you can look at pictures, you can watch all vlogs you could ever watch, and yet, nothing could ever describe how your experience will turn out, no amount of media and no amount of stories - sure they can guide you into that direction and they can make you wish you were there, but again, you need to experience it to know how it will be for you personally.

I believe that the lessons I've learned through internationalization in the various environments I've found myself in have allowed me to improve as a person, have allowed me to become a better me. I wholeheartedly recommend the experience to anyone, and I believe that through the integration of the international sphere into our lives, from the earliest of ages, we can enhance not only the understanding of those around us, but also of the uniqueness of our cultures. I know that my internationalization journey is not at its end, and I am eager to see where it will take me.