

EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation 2022

Reflective Portfolio by Erika Kum (University of Ljubljana)

COVER LETTER

In the modern area, we can't get anywhere in life without internationalisation. Wider access to travelling, quick connections, and the internet are just some of the examples, of how we come across different cultures and places. Coming from the small country of Slovenia, this is even more important to us, since we're in touch with different foreign people from a young age. That's why it's important to be open-minded and accepting, as well as flexible and open to different cultures.

This program allowed me to deepen my international connections and gain more experience. It gave me the final push for many activities and encouraged me to engage more in international events and work. Through my student job at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Food I've developed a professional relationship with many people from abroad while learning how to communicate and write documents for different parties. During the European Youth Meetings, I took part in the discussion groups, where we talked about different problems that we, as a society, face. From racism and poverty to climate change and war. Because there were people from all over the world in those groups, it was important to look at the problems from multiple points of view, because some people were deeply affected by those problems and their view on them is much different than for example mine. With that, I grew through different events and gained new experiences and knowledge. Because of the foreign countries I visited, I learnt to be more adapting and flexible, as well as open-minded and accepting. I find it much less of a problem to adapt to changes now and to adapt to other people when they need it. It's important to keep my own culture and be proud of it, but also to accept others and be respectful towards them. In my opinion, we must adapt to the culture of the country and people we are traveling to, even if it's in conflict with our own, and that's what I've learnt the most during my international activities.

While travelling and engaging in activities in different countries I came across many different cultures. The biggest culture shock for me was when I visited India. Unfortunately, I didn't read much about it before going, so it came to me as a big surprise. From different religions, food, and clothing, I felt a strong need to adapt my behaviour and change the way I look, by covering

my shoulders and thighs. It was the same as my experience at the European Youth Meetings. Because we were from different countries, we had different cultures and religions which showed up in the talking groups. Our differences in languages also appeared. Once I was in a group where others spoke English very badly. It was difficult to discuss serious topics like that when we couldn't even communicate in English. In the end, we were talking in five different languages, translating stuff from one to another, or sometimes just trying to find the similarities in our languages and communicate with them. As I study linguistics and am learning to become a Slovene teacher, I know that languages are very important stuff. I enjoy listening to other languages and learning them. I speak fluently six languages (Slovene, English, German, Russian, Slovak, and Croatian) and partly four more (Serbian, Romanian, Marathi, and Spanish). That helps me while speaking with foreigners, especially at my job as a Slovene language teacher, because I can more easily adapt to my student's mother tongue and teach them what's important for them to understand the Slovene language.

I see the college I'm attending as a good and high-quality program, where I learn a lot. But I can't deny that there is still a lot of knowledge that we don't get. And besides knowledge, we also need experience if we want that knowledge to work. That's why the activities in which I took part were so important to me and my career. While working on the BIOEASTsUP project I learnt public speaking without fear, writing documents, and how to apply to projects. I didn't learn that because somebody would sit me down and teach me, but I learnt it while doing it. I failed many times, but I learnt from the failures and made sure I'm better next time. Same as that, nobody teaches us in college how to interact with foreigners, how to adapt to them, and how to show them respect. That's something you must learn on your own through experience. And that's something I learnt during these activities that I attended. Nothing I heard in college could fully prepare me how to teach a group of foreigners how to speak Slovene. I had to figure it out on my own through many tries and fails until I came across the perfect way for each student.

During the activities I faced many personal challenges, overcoming which helped me grow and improve. But I also came across many local and global challenges – a lot of which I didn't know about before. While working at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Food I became aware of the problem of climate change. I saw how different countries are tackling this problem and we discussed together and shared the best practices on what to do. In September 2021 we prepared a high-level conference in Ljubljana on the topic of bioeconomy to make it more popular and make people more aware of it. We also discussed global challenges in the

discussion groups at the European Youth Meetings and tried finding solutions for them from different international angles.

Altogether, I gained many experiences and became more open-minded. I understand internationalisation as being aware of the challenges and differences in the world, yet still accepting them and being respectful and open-minded. I believe we can tackle the problems if we work together and listen to each other. We must be flexible and adapt to each other so that we can work together. Mostly, I see internationalisation as being able to work together with people from different cultures, different races, religions, languages, and different backgrounds. While all of us are still listening and understanding each other. That is internationalisation for me.

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Mahatma Gandhi once said that we should “learn as if you were to live forever” and I truly believe in that. During the last years of college, we tend to think that we’ll be finally free from learning, we will finish college and then be done with books forever, but that mentality is wrong and that’s what I learned during this year.

I decided to join the EUCI because it was offered to us as a subject to gain extra credits. I chose it without much thinking because I thought it was an easy subject with no exam at the end. I was wrong on the easy part, but I never regretted it. The EUCI program encouraged me to go out of my comfort zone and gain new experience and knowledge, which I am sure to use later in life. That’s why I’m grateful for the opportunity and am happy to be able to write this portfolio as a final step in this program.

At the University of Ljubljana, I attended the “EUTOPIA International work” subject, through which I attended a three-month-long course *The professor skill set: writing and presenting like the world's best professors*, which was taught by Professor Noah Charney. We were discussing how to write scientific research and how to successfully present it. As someone who has a goal of becoming a researcher and someone who is a published author, I first thought we will only talk about stuff that I already know. I was happily surprised. I learned many new tricks and worked on my self-confidence when publicly presenting. The professor taught us about the gap between how we’re used to writing research and how it is supposed to be, and I learned that many times I take the wrong approach in writing. The exercises in the course gave me an insight

into my writing and the guidance from the professor helped me perfect it. Through our university program, I also attended two international events. On the first one, The EUTOPIA Week, which took place in November 2021, I was only an attendee. During the presentations, there was also an emphasis on Horizon Europe, with which I'm connected through work at the Ministry of Agriculture in Ljubljana, so it was nice to connect my academic skills with my work skills. I was listening and learning from others, which helped me a lot in my next event, which was the Warwick Economics Summit, which I attended as a student representative in February 2022. Here I had to work in English and work with a larger group of people from different countries. Since I speak many different languages, this helped me a lot in communicating with others. I have also participated in the seminars for the EUCI, where we work together with people of different cultures and languages, which is a challenge, because we often don't understand each other or have different outlooks on stuff, but we do our best to learn from each other. We often discuss the challenges of different cultures and how important it is, that we are open-minded and accepting.

Since June 2021 I've been working as a project assistant at the Slovenian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Food. I am a part of the project BIOEASTsUP, where we work together with people from East and Central European countries to bring circular economy and bioeconomy into our country's economies. I spend around 20 to 30 hours a week in the office or at various meetings and conferences. Since I'm a student of Slovene Studies (linguistics) I never had a strong opinion about the economy, nor did I much care for it. But working in a group of passionate people from different countries made me realize that this is a topic we all should be aware of. Climate change is a real thing and it's a real threat to us, so it's our job to do something about it. For more than a year we worked together trying to be heard and to do something about our environment, even though the governments are sadly mostly focused on money. I still see this as a challenge and will continue working until we reach our goal.

While the experience mentioned above gave me a lot of chances for working in an international environment, I am still most of the time hidden in the safe place of our office, except for the occasional conferences, while the meetings are always held online. But the actual experience of foreign people and countries I got when I attended the European Youth Meetings for three consecutive years in Riga (Latvia), Basel (Switzerland), and Madrid (Spain). Each time I spent a little over a week in a foreign country, staying with a host family. I strongly remember my first time, in Riga, where I got lost on the first day, was late for the meal, and was searching for a bus while crying. If you had asked me at that time, I would have said it was absolutely horrible,

but just because of that I was able to grow and learn. One of the biggest challenges was also when I was in Madrid, I was staying with an older lady, who did not speak English at all, while I don't speak Spanish. We couldn't understand each other so it was very difficult to communicate. We tried everything, from calling someone to translate over the phone, using Google translator, and just using hand mimics and hoping that the other will understand it. During these meetings, we also had talking groups in which we were paired with students from different countries, and we talked about world problems and how to fix them. In those meetings, I met many great people and I still keep in touch with some.

Besides the European Youth Meetings, I travelled to other countries as well. I love traveling, even though I find it challenging. I enjoy gaining new experiences and learning about other cultures, languages, and places. A few years ago, I went to the United Kingdom as an Au-Pair. I travelled to Leicester and stayed for two months with a Nigerian family, taking care of two girls, aged two and four. I can say that my biggest problem here was the food. I have quite a sensitive stomach and the food I had to prepare for the girls there was way too spicy for me. This was the first time I realized how much culture we put just in our foods and how very different we make meals out of the same ingredients I also use at home. A similar problem occurred when I visited India this New year. I spent three weeks with an Indian family in Pune, Maharashtra. Besides dealing with food, I realized another thing. I was standing out. Since I'm a very pale blonde person with blue eyes, people there often stared at me and were giving me weird looks. Since I come from a region that isn't that ethnically diverse, this was a new experience for me, because I have never before had the experience of me being the odd one. It gave me a completely new look at the world. Since I come from a small countryside village, where every foreigner stands out, I now experienced the opposite – me being that foreigner who just wants to hide from all the looks.

Since February 2022, after I returned from India, I didn't travel much. Instead of that, I started teaching Slovene. I am studying to become a teacher of the Slovene language, which involves teaching in primary schools and high schools, but also teaching Slovene in language schools to foreign students. I've been having two groups of students, the first one being students from Slavic countries, one from Bosnia, one from Croatia, one from Poland, and one from the Czech Republic. In the second group, I'm teaching a person from Moldova and a person from the United States of America. This helped me see my language from a different angle. In college, they are mostly preparing us to teach Slovene to Slovene kids in schools, but not much about how to explain and teach everything to a foreigner who has no idea about Slovene. Through the

months I learned how to explain things to them and how to teach them most successfully. But I also learned to have an individualistic approach to teaching. A person from Croatia, for example, needs a completely different explanation, since the languages are close, also their exercises need to be different and focused on different stuff than for example when teaching an American. That made me realize that we all have different backgrounds and it's very important to be aware of that background, not only in language learning but also in other more personal stuff. We can never completely erase our history and background, so we need to be aware of that.

I am a student of Slovene studies with a love for language and cultures, but I am also an artist and a writer. I write Slovene novels, German and English short stories, and English and Slovak poems. Mostly with my poems I'm trying to reach people. I'm writing about events we face, war, the pandemic, fear, hatred, and other topics. I post the poems on my Instagram account ([ekki.m.blak](https://www.instagram.com/ekki.m.blak)) and with it, I try to reach as many people as possible, to encourage them to be kind, caring, and aware of other people. But sometimes poems don't reach far enough. Whether it is because of language barriers, misunderstandings, or just when we're too lazy to read, that's why I always add a drawing or painting to the poem. They say a photo can say a thousand words and that's what I'm trying to do with my art. I'm trying to get people to feel something while they look at my works and I want them to get the need to do something to help this world.

To this portfolio, I've added one of my drawings, which I created especially for the EUCI program (see next page).



On it, I portrayed a black and white silhouette, to which I added parts of colours. The colours represent different colours, but since they're all on the same silhouette it shows, how we are all one, even though we might see differences between us. The drawing also shows parts of me as people, whom I met through my international experiences. I believe we are all the same no matter our race, culture, or religion, we are all people, and we should all treat each other with kindness and respect. That's what I wanted to show in my drawing.

To conclude, I've gained a lot of new knowledge and experience during this year with the help of the EUTOPIA programme at Ljubljana and the EUCI program run centrally by the alliance. Most importantly, I learned that I should never stop learning. Because things are changing and the world is growing, so we shouldn't be stagnant in it. Besides that, the international experience taught me to be open-minded and to listen to others' opinions because we can make this world a better place only if we work together and are all prepared to work for it. It was a pleasure working with different groups of people with the same mindset, yet still from different cultural backgrounds and different languages, which gave the whole experience a much bigger picture.