

Introduction

This summary essay places the international activities and experiences described in the portfolio presentation within the context of the four learning objectives of the European Certificate of Internationalisation, viz. Reflective (Section 1), Intercultural (Section 2), Intersectoral (Section 3) and Challenge-based (Section 4).

1. Reflective

My experiences to date have enabled me to develop my capacities as a reflective learner and thinker. For example, my British Council teaching assistantship sparked reflection on the differences between English and French educational systems and the assumptions implicit in each. The socioeconomically deprived students I taught on the assistantship were being educated according to a syllabus that, with its emphasis on cultural topics rather than practical language use, arguably did not cater to the linguistic needs and priorities of this particular student population. Similarly, my interview with a Portuguese first-generation student revealed the extent to which 'hidden' cultural assumptions in a sociology module led to him feeling alienated and unable to participate on equal terms with his classmates. The insights afforded by these experiences have informed my practice going forward as an educator, committed to breaking down such barriers to inclusivity.

My decision to choose a first-generation international student as the basis for my interview was driven in large part by my reading of Jennifer Morton's work on the ethical costs of upward mobility for such students (2019). I felt compelled to use what (limited) power I had as a scholar to reveal the experiences of this largely marginalized population in British academia, thus extending Morton's project which concentrates on American students. This ongoing preoccupation with empowering marginalized communities has found further expression in my outreach work with the Sutton Trust. This demonstrates my ability to use external ideas to inform my ongoing practice as a researcher and academic communicator.

2. Intercultural

Coming from an immigrant family of Chinese extraction, I have long been fascinated by both Eastern and Western cultures, as well as the links between them. This fed my desire to study Mandarin to fulfill the compulsory language requirement of my MA degree in Transnational Studies at UCL. As part of this course, I wrote a project essay comparing Christmas and Chinese New Year. By putting these two festivals into conversation with each other, I acquired the linguistic skills needed to compare and contrast items in a foreign language. Furthermore, I gained an appreciation of the similarities and differences in the ways people in different parts of the world mark culturally significant dates in the calendar, thus enhancing my intercultural awareness. I was also able to use my own personal experience of both these festivals in order to bring out the connections and contrasts, thereby demonstrating the value of first-hand knowledge in explaining and interpreting cultural differences. More generally, the course provided a solid foundation in Mandarin which I aim to consolidate in my future career.

3. Intersectoral

Throughout my education and extracurricular activities, I have sought to work across multiple disciplines. For example, my Erasmus studies in Grenoble included courses in geopolitics, marketing and Irish history; similarly, my MA modules at UCL spanned a range of subjects, from film studies to political philosophy. Such multidisciplinary has contributed to my development as a flexible thinker, able to adapt to the challenges of different disciplinary norms and subject matter.

I have also sought to bring my particular expertise in the social sciences to a wider audience, such as through my work as a judge for the Seismic Design Competition run by the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute (EERI). This competition involved teams from across the world presenting an earthquake engineering solution to a prescribed brief. As a member of the judging panel (and the only social scientist), I interrogated the contestants on the aesthetic and economic impacts of their solutions. This sensitized them to the various non-engineering considerations at hand, which the participants will hopefully take into account when they face practical engineering challenges in their working lives.

My ongoing collaboration with EERI has opened up partnerships with other individuals working in earthquake science, engineering and policy. I have forged connections with engineers, seismologists and emergency managers (among others) who work in the Pacific Northwest USA and Canada, which is the case study area of interest in my doctoral research. Through these links, I have gained an insight into the empirical reality of earthquake hazards from a multitude of disciplinary angles. I have benefited enormously from the insights afforded by these individuals, which will feed into my PhD thesis on the ethical and political issues in earthquake risk management in the Pacific Northwest. My doctorate will thus combine the perspectives from seismology, engineering, ethics and public policy analysis into a holistic, interdisciplinary and well-informed answer to the question of what is an ethically defensible seismic policy.

4. Challenge-based

Disaster management is but one of the challenges facing public officials in the coming decades. Gender justice, sustainable development, technological risks and many other issues will be high on the public policy agenda. My own background in moral and political philosophy has equipped me with the ethical awareness needed to confront these problems in an international context. For instance, my MA dissertation argued that liberal democracies have a moral duty to provide gender-neutral public toilets. In this research study, I showed how the philosophical literature on discrimination can help to explain the harms inflicted on transgender people by urinary segregation (the practice of segregating toilets by sex). This will help to inform public debates surrounding gender-neutral toilets in the USA, UK and elsewhere, united by a common language of anti-discrimination, therefore improving outcomes for transgender people around the world.

Gah-Kai Leung

EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation Summary Essay 2021

I will continue this policy-oriented arm of my work through my extracurricular activity as a Frédéric Bastiat Fellow in 2022. As a fellowship holder, I will become familiar with the Austrian, Virginia and Bloomington schools of political economy and the ways in which they can be applied to areas such as technological innovation, financial regulation and crisis management. Through engaging with these schools of thought, I will gain exposure to academic ideas that depart from my own political orientation. This will enhance my ability to articulate and defend my own informed response to policy problems, thus developing my skills as a reflective thinker. By advancing my own views in dialogue with the views of rivals, I aim to translate the academic literature encountered on the fellowship into practical solutions that could lay the foundations for a policy-focused postdoctoral career. At the same time, I will acquire a better understanding of policy dynamics, which will improve the regulatory aspects of my own PhD research.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have contextualized my portfolio presentation with reference to the learning objectives of Reflective (Section 1), Intercultural (Section 2), Intersectoral (Section 3) and Challenge-based (Section 4). Throughout, I have demonstrated a range of transferable skills that will be useful in forging my postdoctoral career path, whether that be in an academic or non-academic setting.

References

Morton, J. (2019) *Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.