



EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI)

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1. How it began

During the time at my high school in a little town in the North of Germany, I developed the dream to go abroad for six months after I would receive my diploma. I was able to choose Canada and in September 2015 after I got my diploma, I started my first travel alone to a country where I have never been and without anyone I know. Although many students from my high school went abroad before starting to work or going to university, I know that I am very lucky that I could save money and also that my parents had financial resources to be able to realize this dream of me.

For the next six months I considered Vancouver my home. Generally, Canada is a very international country with approximately 22% of the Canadian population being immigrants or with this background. Personally, I experienced this multicultural environment as well fitting together and everyone seemed to have found their place in that city which I would assume is not self-explanatory compared to other cities. For example in Brussels I noticed that some cultures seem to not be integrated in the same way as it is the case, I experienced it in Vancouver. Nevertheless, I cannot fully discuss this topic, as I was only living in Vancouver for six months.

I lived in a host family together with eight other girls who came from all over the world, for example from The Netherlands, France, Spain, or Switzerland. Those girls attended the same language school with me over the following months. We studied English together, explored Vancouver and other parts of Canada, lived together and also learned a lot from each other but most importantly, although we all had different backgrounds, we quickly became friends. This friendship is unique and lasts hopefully for a lifetime. In addition, the host family where we lived immigrated from the Philippines several years ago, so we could experience an additional culture directly at home. They always invited us to family dinners and organized a Christmas party only for us.

I knew before this journey that there are certain stereotypes of countries and inhabitants, for instance that Germans are on time, very direct and tidy, compared to for instance people from the South of Europe who are more relaxed about many things. As I lived also with two Spanish girls, I can now say this is true. Many times I found myself waiting for them and getting impatient but after some time I got used to it and more relaxed myself. But obviously this also differs from person to person.

2. How I continued

When I arrived back in Germany, I was still in contact with most of my friends from Vancouver, as we stayed in touch via Skype and WhatsApp. Nevertheless, I missed the intercultural and constant exchange of different perspectives that I experienced during the last months, which is why I joined a student association called Erasmus Student Network (ESN) in Hanover when I started studying Management and Economics at the university.

This association supports international students to integrate well in the German (university) life by organizing events like welcome and goodbye BBQs, canoeing, dancing classes, city trips, museum visits or similar activities. Thereby I was able to meet so many people from everywhere, if it was India or Paraguay for instance, and also how to adapt to their cultures by for example always having something without meat at the BBQs or when meat is offered that then it is not only pork.

In addition to ESN, the International Office of the University of Hanover offered a buddy program where I was able to individually support international students for one semester. In total, I took part in this program for two years, so I got to know four international students, each one from Brazil, Italy, Belgium, and The Netherlands on an individual basis. During that time I helped them to get to know Germany administration, e.g. opening a bank account or signing a phone contract, but also, I invited them on a personal basis to meet German friends, to show them around the city and recommend restaurants. To all of them I still have contact and I would not want to miss this opportunity.

The university prepared a kind of program similar to EUTOPIA themselves, which is called “BIKO” which translates to “certificate of intercultural competences”. Therefore I had to visit language courses – I chose French and English, visit a seminar in an international environment – I chose project management, organizing at least one event together with ESN – as I was part of ESN for 3.5 years as a member but also board member I organized many events – and to be a study buddy for at least one semester – which I already described. I found this program a great opportunity to experience many aspects of internationalism and to generally broaden the horizon.

3. How it is going

Since September 2020 I am studying the master's in international business in Brussels. Brussels itself, as the heart of Europe, is a very diverse, plurilingual and multicultural city. Next to that, the study that I chose mostly addresses and consists of international students, coming from all over the world, for example Taiwan, Mexico, or France. During this study, the Vrije Universiteit Brussels is focusing on learning from each other which can be seen in several group assignments that are organized. Thereby, I was glad about my experiences with different cultures earlier, as I could better understand behavior for example from a girl from Egypt who did not dare to say her opinion during group tasks. My experiences helped me to talk in a more understanding and problem-solving way than without, I would guess.

Living in another country also motivated me to further improve my Dutch skills and to start again to learn French. Via a friend, I got a contact to a person who is a translator and offered me French classes, which I am very happy about. In addition, in Brussels you hear different languages from so many people, if it is in restaurants or at university or just in the street. This motivates me to not stop learning languages and continue being curious about cultures.

Especially during the pandemic it was difficult to get to know people in Brussels. That is why I decided to join the student association Academics for Companies (AFC) Brussels where I was at first a marketing member. We organize events, workshops, and consulting projects for all kinds of university and college students so they can find out what they are interested in, hence, to minimize the gap between students and companies. The team itself consists of 25 international students which is why all our communication as well as our activities for other students are in English. Moreover, it is very important to us that we offer a broad range of topics and are welcoming and including everyone, so that students from different cultural and academic backgrounds can get in touch with each other. This spring I had the chance to become president of this association for one year and I am very curious about what the next academic year will bring. As we are currently setting up the plan, we can still decide on what to offer in cooperation with several, mostly Brussels based companies. One workshop will be an "Internationalization Track" where we want to foster the learning outcomes that are also tackled by EUTOPIA.

When I heard about EUTOPIA I was directly interested in this program and not only took part in the seminars but also in the EUTOPIA week discussions in addition to promoting this week by taking over the Instagram account of the VUB.

4. Summary

4.1 Plurilingual

Demonstrate engagement with one or more non-native languages and understanding of the multi-lingual nature of internationalization.

As I grew up in Germany, my mother tongue is German. When I was in the third grade of primary school, at the age of 8, I started to learn English. This I continued until I finished my high school, and I also took English courses on the highest level possible during high school. When I was 12, we had to choose either French or Latin in school, where I decided to learn Latin to have a basis for learning additional languages. After high school, as described in chapter 1, I went to Vancouver where I further developed my language Skills in English. There I also came in contact with many people from other countries and languages and when I was back in Germany, I decided to learn Dutch. This was quite easy, as it is very similar to English. Over the years, as can be seen in my activities, I constantly continued to speak English and also Dutch, as well as starting to learn French in university, which I picked up again when moving to Brussels. Also, as my master studies are in English it helps me to improve my English in the academic area.

In the coming years I would like to further improve English and Dutch and get enough skills to have a conversation in French by the end of 2022. After that I would like to continue learning languages, for example Spanish or Norwegian to be able to communicate with as many people as possible in their native languages.

4.2 Intercultural

Demonstrate awareness of relations between different national cultures and ability to reflect on these.

Since Vancouver I was in constant contact with other cultures and continuously learned from all of them about their behavior, their understanding of the world but also more about my own culture which I did not expect. Germans can for instance be too direct for some people, so when talking to other cultures I try to adapt my choice of words, depending on my partner in front of me. There are many more examples that I could list here. Also because Germany has a known history, sometimes I had to “defend” myself against inappropriate jokes which was a challenge but now I know how to handle that and hopefully stop it in the future.

In my opinion more people should be in contact to other cultures before judging them too fast, which is why I also think that this EUTOPIA certification is a great program to think and reflect about this.

4.3 Intersectoral

Demonstrate transdisciplinary knowledge and experience in an international, non-academic context.

Especially in the student association Erasmus Student Network (ESN) I worked together with students from different studies, for instance physic, politics, social sciences, or medicine students. The same goes for my engagement at AFC now where it is similar but still improvable.

It is like with different cultures, with each kind of person of a different study you have to slightly adapt the behavior or way of communication. The same goes for talking to someone from my study, as I know what they have learned and what I can expect from their way of thinking and arguments. It is always interesting to get to know other viewpoints, if it is a person from the same study or a different. But to be able to realize that interdisciplinary communication is crucial.

4.4 Challenge-based

Demonstrate awareness of and engagement with local or global challenges from an international perspective.

In my opinion, every time you talk to a person, if he or she is from your country or another you need to be aware of local and global challenges. It is all about the small things, if it is talking about environmental challenges or just the integration of an international student in my own student city Hanover. Communication is key and being aware about certain topics is in the backs of all of our heads but by communicating we always develop and adapt these points of view and therefore also our thinking and behavior about small or big challenges in the world. In addition, I believe that when getting to know people from other countries you only broaden this horizon you have from your own surroundings, and I can be grateful that I had the chance to already have met so many international individuals and have interesting and important discussions.

Especially during my time at ESN I would say that we tackled both local and global challenge of avoiding prejudices and judging too fast by bringing many cultures together in one place with one activity. The same would go for AFC, nevertheless this is more goal oriented or career minded.

4.5 Outlook

In the future I plan on being continuously in contact with people from all over the world to explore new cultures and most importantly to learn from them. That is why I also chose to do an internship in Brussels, even though I am not fluent in French. From July to October 2021 I am working in a consulting firm called Greenfish that is focused on sustainability. This experience also touches all of the learning outcomes of EUTOPIA, as I am speaking English and Dutch in the internship, I am in contact with people from Belgium, The Netherlands and France daily, who have different working backgrounds, for example marketing, engineering, or politics, and finally, as a team we are working towards a more sustainable future for companies, so we tackle both local and global challenges. Regarding the last aspect we obviously keep goals like the Sustainable Development Goals from the United Nations and similar ones in mind. In the office as well as with clients, NGOs and governments intercultural competences are necessary and will be in the future for the company but also me personally.