

EUCI Reflective Portfolio

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Reflective Essay

Studying at United World College (2021-2023) has been a truly transformative experience for me. As I look back at my time there, there is a particular event that has profoundly shaped my perspectives and personal development. With the support of United World College, I initiated and organised the *SuSTYLEability* campaign with my team, which is made up of passionate environmentalists and fashion lovers in my school.

The *SuSTYLEability* campaign is a second-hand fashion program that aims to popularise sustainable fashion and raise environmental awareness in general. It started off with collecting unwanted second-hand clothing items from the community, with members from over 90 nationalities. Then, we planned to redesign and repurpose the collected textiles, for them to be displayed in a fashion show. My school had a close-knitted network of peers and teachers from diverse backgrounds, which exposed me to different cultures, belief systems, and ways of living. The process of collecting second-hand clothes gave me an opportunity to prompt in-depth conversations to understand the view on sustainability from multiple perspectives. A Japanese schoolmate shared her concerns with me about the *SuSTYLEability* campaign. In Japan, there is a cultural emphasis on newness, cleanliness, and pristine condition of clothing and possessions. Wearing used clothing is often seen as undesirable or even shameful. Raised in this culture, my Japanese schoolmate feels hesitant to be a model in the final fashion show. On the other hand, I have also had another fruitful conversation with a Malagasy schoolmate. As Madagascar is an island nation with an exceptionally high level of biodiversity and endemic species, many Malagasy people directly depend on natural resources for their living, leading to the spiritual significance of nature in their culture. Unfortunately, Madagascar has a high climate vulnerability. Since my Malagasy schoolmate was directly impacted by the environmental challenges, she has become more motivated to protect the environment. Through the frequent intercultural exchange, I have been exposed to a multitude of viewpoints and how they are shaped by their diverse experiences and upbringing. The genuine and open-minded conversations have provided me with a much richer and more nuanced understanding of global affairs. I now recognize that there are often multiple valid perspectives on a given topic, and I have become skilled at analysing problems from multiple angles before forming my own conclusions. Instead of forcing my opinions upon someone else, I have learned to always leave room for questions, to listen with empathy, and to respect. This intercultural competence will be an invaluable asset as I navigate an increasingly globalised world.

Coordinating a team of designers and models from different nationalities required me to step outside my comfort zone and embrace a leadership role that I had never assumed before. Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the cultural difference within the team, the complicated logistics, the endless possibilities and uncertainty. But instead of seeing it as a problem, I took a more positive approach to appreciate the rich cultural exchange that occurs on our team. During the planning process, we organised workshops where participants shared their traditional clothing, music, and environmental beliefs. These sessions not only celebrated our diversity, but also strengthened our bonds as a team. I found myself deeply moved by the stories behind the designs and the cultural significance they held for each member on our team. One of my team members, who was raised in a village in Myanmar, has grown up being a fashion enthusiast and a weaver. But as he grew older, he noticed the negative environmental changes reducing the raw materials that once were so easily found.

Determined to preserve his heritage and the environment, he used natural colour dyeing to create a fashion piece that resembles his traditional clothing. Hearing his experience reinforced my belief that fashion is not merely about aesthetics; it is a powerful medium for storytelling and cultural expression. And the SUSTYLEABILITY campaign will be the perfect stage to showcase their stories about mother nature and fashion.

Instead of trying to control and design every detail in the campaign, I decided to step back. I created the SUSTYLEABILITY fashion show as a stage for different individuals to shine. Each participant brought their own experiences and viewpoints on culture, fashion, sustainability, which shaped the overall vision of the fashion show. This diversity enriched the fashion show, allowing us to explore different aesthetics and narratives. As I reflect on this experience, I recognize the value of empathy in any collaborative endeavour, especially one with such diversity within the group. Understanding the barriers and challenges faced by my peers allowed me to support them more effectively. For example, the Japanese schoolmate I mentioned earlier felt understood through our active communication and non-judgemental listening. Despite being hesitant about the campaign at first, she came up with a suggestion of an upcycling workshop. I eagerly took her advice and implemented it into action. By putting old and scattered fabrics together, we turned textile waste into brand new fashion pieces that have refreshing and stylish looks. At last, my Japanese schoolmate wore the piece she upcycled as a model at the sustainable fashion show. I am very satisfied with the outcome of the campaign as it totally exceeded my expectations. By actively listening to their concerns and validating their experiences, I fostered a sense of belonging among the team. Leadership isn't about directing the team and rejecting differences, but it really is empowering team members and bringing out their colours to put together a big picture. This approach not only strengthened our collaboration but also enriched my own understanding of the diverse backgrounds we represented.

The experience of organising SUSTYLEABILITY campaign has had a lasting impact on my personal growth. I emerged from this journey with enhanced leadership skills, greater intercultural awareness, and a deeper appreciation for diversity. I now approach challenges with a more open mindset, recognizing that collaboration often requires navigating complexities and embracing differences. As I embark on a journey beyond the United World College, I am motivated to continue engaging and fostering cultural dialogue on the outlook of global issues and social change. The knowledge, skills, and values I have gained here will be invaluable assets as I navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world. I aim to engage with diverse communities, making connections that transcend cultural boundaries. I am confident that the intercultural competence and reflective mindset I have developed will serve me well, no matter what challenges or opportunities lie ahead.

A love letter to United World College

By Leah Tam

took the keys, ran down the stairs
i wonder what they think of me
lost in a sea of unfamiliarity
not sure if here's where i belong

as time goes by, i found myself
pouring my heart when you're around
you have seen me cry, stood by my side
the pain was worth it, for what we found

across the galaxy, stars collide in space
a golden chance that we're in this place
for in this sea of unfamiliarity,
you walked me through the journey

if only we could bottle up the past
like a scent that lasts and lasts
never fading, never stale
a memory that will never fail

i know we would want to feel alive
and keep our youth time close beside
it might be a glimpse in my whole life
but i will hold onto til the end of time