



EUTOPIA CERTIFICATE OF INTERNATIONALISATION

Student Portfolio

Lena Carstens
University of Gothenburg

July 2022

Word count: 4458

Cover Letter

The EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI), an initiative of the EUTOPIA community, is intended to help students reflect upon and gain recognition for their involvement in international learning activities. To achieve this, four learning outcomes must be met and presented in a written portfolio. The learning outcomes are the following: reflective, intercultural, intersectoral and challenge based. How I have met the programme's learning outcomes, will be presented in the next section, the cover letter.

Reflective

The reflective learning outcome is one of the easiest to overlook and the learning outcome that is connected to each of the other learning outcomes. In this portfolio I have not only described my experiences but also included reflections that explain how one international experience led to another and how I entered each experience with another attitude towards interculturality. I provided specific examples of events and experiences that made me aware of cultural differences and not only described my own feelings but also the points of view of the other people involved. I tried to evaluate the situation, draw some conclusions from it and develop implications for the future. Since the experiences are in most of the cases related to interculturality, the reflections relate to underlying norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions that have influenced the actions of the people involved. The described experiences have also contributed to my personal learning journey in interculturality and globalisation which can be followed more easily through the reflections.

I also reflected upon how the international experiences can relate to one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and in which way I experienced non-academic contexts and the transdisciplinary and intersectoral learning.

Intercultural

I have included several intercultural activities in this portfolio to prove the acquisition of intercultural competence. Those include a 3-week student exchange at a partner school in Fargo, North Dakota during eleventh grade in High School and a voluntary service in Cartago, Costa Rica during five months after having finished High School. Within my Bachelor studies in Germany, I then completed an exchange semester in Guadalajara, Mexico at one of the most recognised universities in the country. Working at a Swedish company with operations in several European countries after my bachelor's degree I experienced the collaboration within multi-national and multi-cultural teams. In August 2021 I started my master's degree in Gothenburg, Sweden and included an exchange semester in Lima, Peru in the second semester.

These activities are presented in chronological order to be able to follow my learning journey and personal growth trajectory. I have been able to get to know more than one national culture and for three countries also over a longer period of time which is important to also comprehend the lower part of the cultural iceberg which is hidden below the surface of the water. Even though most of my intercultural experiences have been within cultures of the American continent, through my Study Trip to Vietnam I got to know a culture of the Asian continent.

Intersectoral

With regard to the two exchange semesters I completed, the experience has mostly been academic. However, even within this academic context, I managed to make experiences in non-academic contexts and learned about the co-mingling and interacting of academic and non-academic fields. For example, I took part in local community projects in Lima, organised by the university, or in a project

supporting migrants on their route to the United States in Guadalajara. These two projects are good examples of how academia never is isolated from other fields or from society in general.

In addition, the voluntary service has been entirely non-academic. I was working in the public sector (in education) and was closer to society in general compared to the academic experiences.

The model of dual study programmes (combining academic semesters with practical work experience) that I chose for my bachelor's degree is proof of the growing importance of a transdisciplinary approach in the field of academics. I was able to directly apply concepts and models from university to the context of the company I was working for.

Through these experiences I have learned how to act as an interpreter and translator in the borderlands between disciplines and between the disciplines and society.

Challenge based

The intercultural experiences I have had in the past are related to diverse global as well as local challenges. To start with, the voluntary service in a school library in Costa Rica is related to the challenge of providing (free) education for everyone, also included in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (No. 4 – Quality education). As an assistant to the librarian, I contributed to promoting books as a medium for education through diverse events and activities. Even if this activity is on a rather local level, the sum of these kinds of activities contributes to the achievement of the global goal of Quality education.

The work at the Swedish company “Vattenfall” was related to the 7th Sustainable Development Goal - “Affordable and Clean Energy”. On a European level, the company was innovating and developing sustainable ways of energy generation, for example through wind energy, solar power, and water turbines. Being part of these efforts to combat climate change, I increased my awareness of the global extent of the challenge and even changed my own lifestyle.

Poverty, hunger, pollution, and (gender) inequality have been other challenges I became aware of by living in societies of developing countries.

Conclusion

For the conclusion I would like to present my understanding of internationalisation resulting from my international experiences. Personally, I think internationalisation is closely connected to the concepts of dialogue, mutual learning, and respect. In a globalised world, it is even more important to respect (cultural) differences, to try to understand them as well as being able to adapt to a certain degree to local customs. At the same time, it is important to conserve cultural elements like beliefs, traditions and languages which provide a sense of identification. In my opinion, the trends of internationalisation as well as localisation are taking place at the same time. An increased pace of internationalisation can induce the urge to reconcentrate on local characteristics of culture and society. This can lead to self-segregation tendencies among cultures and underlines the need for cross-cultural dialogue. On the other hand, the advantages of internationalisation are undeniable, like adaptability, flexibility, cultural awareness, tolerance, unity, personal development etc. - and lead to increased interaction between different cultures.

Internationalisation is both about the awareness of challenges that affect particular regions as well as being able to see the larger context.

Reflective Essay

The following essay as part of the EUTOPIA portfolio is meant to give additional background to the intercultural experiences I could make and provide deep reflections on those. The essay is structured in chronological order of my international experiences since they have conditioned each other.

Student exchange in Fargo

My first international experience that was not in the form of holidays spent in another country was a student exchange at a partner school in Fargo, North Dakota for three weeks. At that time, during 10th and 11th grade at my German high school I was admiring the United States and the lifestyle Americans were living. I suppose this was mostly due to the representation of the States in the media and the high percentage of American media we are consuming in Germany. From the point of view of most American students, they did not seem to know too much about Germany and were sometimes even asking how we traveled to the States and if we had fridges in Germany.

The overall experience was good even though I got a bit homesick without being able to tell why. After this exchange, I have never been homesick again to this extent so maybe it had to do with my age and degree of independence. In terms of cultural differences, one example is my confusion about the superficiality I experienced. When people were greeting each other, they said "Hi, how are you?" but did not expect an answer to their question. In Germany, most of the time, you expect an honest answer to the question of how the other person is doing. Maybe this habit in the US is influenced by an underlying norm to have a positive attitude and therefore not tell right away if you are not okay.

A challenge that is connected to my experience in North Dakota is reduced inequalities. I was shocked by the very visible racial segregation in the partner high school when black students would use another entrance to the cafeteria than white students. Even though the black population in my German hometown is way lower than in the US, I had never seen this separation before.

In retrospect, this experience was the first of many following that pushed me to become more independent. Because of language and cultural barriers, I could not discuss all the issues with my host family or sister, and because of the time difference, neither with my own family, so I had to find solutions and make decisions myself.

Volunteering in Costa Rica

After finishing high school, I decided to do a voluntary service because I did not just want to travel but also engage in social work and dive deeper into a culture. Because of my Spanish lessons I wanted to go to a Spanish-speaking country and opted for Costa Rica, a small, beautiful country in Middle America. There, I was working in a library that was part of a private high school and lived with a host family. I learned about the great influence that religion has on national cultures, as my host family was relatively strictly practicing the Protestant religion in a Catholic country. One remarkable event was when I asked my host aunt for which candidate she voted during presidential elections. She replied to me that only God will decide who will become the next president of Costa Rica and that we should have faith. Honestly, I was quite shocked and did not comprehend how one can mix religious faith and your personal, democratic voting right. I was glad that my aunt had cast her vote and did not leave the decision entirely in the hands of God. After that experience I questioned my own connection to religion and became more sensitive to the topic so that I avoided any comments that could be provocative for my host family.

My experience in Costa Rica can be connected to the challenge of providing quality education. In Costa Rica, books are relatively expensive and not every family having a child at the school I was working at could afford to buy books. Therefore, the librarian and I tried to promote the service of the school

library with different activities to as many students as possible. We were presenting a different author every week, having reading circles, and also offered chess boards and a table tennis board to attract more students.

Together with the experience in Fargo, this has been a non-academic experience since it took place before I entered university. However, it is interesting to compare the different school systems in Germany, USA, and Costa Rica. In Costa Rica for example, private universities are much more common and perceived to provide a higher quality in education than public schools. This is also connected to the academic field as there are also many private universities in Costa Rica that charge fees. In contrast, private schools and universities are very rare in Germany.

Towards the end of my stay, I became a fan of the Latin American relaxedness, joie de vivre and hospitality because it was quite different to some elements of the German culture. In Germany, people tend to be more reserved and more concerned about punctuality, correctness as well as more stressed about different matters. I was also able to significantly improve my Spanish since I only talked to my host family in Spanish.

Exchange Semester in Mexico

Having enjoyed my stay in Costa Rica and growing fonder of the Latin American culture, for my exchange semester during the bachelor's, I was specifically searching for a partner school in Latin America. At that time, the only partner university in a Spanish speaking country on the American continent was the TEC de Monterrey in Mexico. This is how my choice was made. During the semester, it was even easier for me to get to know the national culture, because I had an advanced level of Spanish compared to when I went to Costa Rica, and I already knew what to expect since the mentality of both Mexican people and Costa Rican people is quite similar. However, this time was also entirely different because I was experiencing the Mexican student life and I did not live with a host family.

As part of a course called "Social Project Management" that I chose, I experienced intersectionality because as a group of students we developed a social project meant to help refugees in a migration center that were resting for a few days before continuing their path towards United States. I learned about their different reasons to flee their home countries in (mostly) Middle America and listened to their stories about things that happened on their trajectory. It was especially nice to see the children's eyes light up and hear them laugh about the weird German accent that I could not get rid of.

Another challenge that I was confronted with apart from (im-)migration was the clash between the rich and the poor in Mexico that was omnipresent. For example, with students from my university who needed to have certain funds to be able to pay the fee, I would go to a mall for shopping and see homeless people with kids in dirty clothes right in front of it, trying to sell some lollypops for minimal donations.

Gender inequality was another issue that is present in both Costa Rica and Mexico because of a culture of "machismo". Because of the high number of assaults from men against women in the subway in Mexico City, the operator introduced a special waggon that was only to be used by women. Getting to know this, it made me really sad that women in Mexico had to be more scared than women in Middle Europe.

International Committee Hamburg

After coming back from Mexico, I became more active in the international committee of my home university because I was very grateful for the great job that the Mexican buddies did during our stay in Mexico. I started organising excursions for the exchange students in Hamburg to help them to get to know each other and get to know the German culture. It was interesting to take on the opposite role

compared to before and be able to accompany the learning process of the guest students. I became even more aware of characteristics of the German culture that I did not see before and that other exchange students noted.

Study trip to Vietnam

My experience in Vietnam took place in 2019 as a study trip initiated by my German university. We could choose between different destinations, and I decided that I wanted to get to know a different culture compared to the Latin American one (if you can generalise) to broaden my horizon. The idea was to gain knowledge about how business is done in other countries and how foreign direct investment can be sustainable. It was very interesting to see how some companies designed not only environmentally sustainable but also socially sustainable businesses because one of the drawbacks of globalisation, among others, is the exploitation of a cheap labour force in East Asian countries to then sell cheap textiles in Europe.

We were meeting both expats and Vietnamese managers who could tell some anecdotes about cultural differences and funny experiences in the past. To me it appeared quite challenging to be an expat because working in another cultural region must be more difficult than studying in another country. The frequent travelling and the language courses in the evening can be very intense. I am still not sure if I would like to try the expat life despite my interest for international workplaces.

I also noted once more how language is key to access a new culture and felt embarrassed about my poor attempts to learn Vietnamese. I could not have the same conversations with Vietnamese people as with Spanish speaking people even though in some cases, technology could build a bridge. One host family was using a translation device that transformed their audios in English sentences within seconds.

Work experience at Vattenfall

At Vattenfall I experienced internationality in a work context. The company is of Swedish origin but operates in several European countries. Working towards a more sustainable future, it can be quite a challenge to unite different nations and cultures in their way of handling the challenge of climate change. For example, in Sweden and France nuclear energy is widely accepted, whereas in Germany, it is almost nonexistent anymore. These different attitudes and cultures had to be combined in a common company policy which promoted becoming "fossilfree in one generation". But what is meant by fossilfree? Does it include nuclear energy? Also interesting to analyse is to which extent Swedish culture is disseminated in the German facilities. My division, for example, was bought by Vattenfall in the early 2000s and people were still using the more formal "Sie" and last names instead of first names, like in Sweden.

Vattenfall is also a good example of how today's challenges are mostly "glocal" challenges. To comply with their new company-wide objectives, Vattenfall decided to sell their brown coal business in the east of Germany. However, the plant was then bought by a Polish company and is still operating today. After all, Vattenfall could maybe improve their image in terms of sustainability, but the coal plant is still polluting our planet earth.

The work at Vattenfall has influenced me in two ways. First of all, I got to know the Swedish (working) culture. Swedes are very democratic in their decision making and have a higher gender equality than Germans at work. Also, hierarchies are very low, and people call each other by their first names. I found all these facts sympathetic, and they probably had some influence in the decision to start my master's degree in Sweden without ever having visited the country.

The second influence was the concern for sustainability. During the pandemic, above all, I started to slowly change my lifestyle and reduce my carbon footprint in my private life. I became vegan, reduced plastic in my home by, for example, mixing my own cleaning products and going shopping in supermarkets without plastic packaging.

Master's degree in Sweden

As mentioned before, I was quite curious about the Swedish culture and not only in a working context. I decided to enroll in the programme "M.Sc. Management" at the University of Gothenburg's School of Business, Economics, and Law (or Handelshögskolan). It is an international master's programme, taught in English language and with approximately 50% non-Swedish students. It is interesting to do group work with people from all over the world, as every person brings a different perspective to the table, due to their cultural background. Because of the different cultural habits and work ethics, the professors sometimes recommended to agree on some rules within the group before starting to work to avoid any conflicts related to punctuality, commitment etc. I found this approach very helpful because the group work tested my patience and understanding for people who arrived late and finished their parts late because it meant more work for the other group members. Punctuality is one of the elements that belong to the "deep culture" and vary widely, and I had to learn that most of the time no bad intentions are at play. I had already experienced these differences during group works in Mexico where I got used to finishing projects last minute.

Above that, it is interesting to apply the learned management concepts to local legal, social, or environmental circumstances. Each international student can add a different perspective and bring in some personal work experience from their home country.

This was also the first time I moved to another country planning to stay longer than just a few months. I had to go through all the migration processes that took about half a year and was officially regarded as an immigrant. Once I realised this, it felt weird, because I had never seen myself as an immigrant, only as a tourist, visitor or even as a European citizen. In my view, immigrants were people that felt forced to leave their country and deserved compassion. This point of view was probably also conditioned by the media and wrong usage of terms related to migration.

The migration process is even more extensive if you are a non-EU student. Non-EU-students must also pay a tuition fee of almost 200.000 Swedish Crowns. It is interesting for me to see how these academic circumstances influence not only the access to education but also the private life of students and their integration in their new home country.

Something I had to learn was that in Sweden, cash is almost never used. Instead, people send the money to the recipient's phone number via the app "Swish". Now, it is not as easy as a simple download of the app in the app store. To be able to use "Swish", you need to have a "Personnummer", a Swedish ID, a Swedish bank account and if possible, a Swedish phone number. And this process takes time. I felt like I could not fully "settle" in Sweden and live the life of a Swede before I got the app Swish. It is funny to me, how small things like this app can make a difference to the integration process when moving to a new country.

Swedish people might on average be even more reserved than Germans which makes it quite hard to make Swedish friends in the beginning. Additionally, my Swedish level was very basic, so I had to talk in English but luckily, most Swedes are proficient in English. They would switch immediately to English once they notice that you are not fluent in Swedish.

The city of Gothenburg, which has repeatedly been named the most sustainable city in the world, as well as the University of Gothenburg, are known for their efforts to reach for increased sustainability.

During my first semester at University of Gothenburg, the “Sustainability week”, in cooperation between the two local universities, was organised. Among other students, I had the chance to attend lectures and panel discussions around the topic of sustainability. With topics such as sustainability in the fashion industry and the potential of algae in the food industry, this gave a new perspective on sustainability, in addition to the one I gained during my work experience at Vattenfall.

Another project that underlines the intersectionality of the academic context was the “Musikhjälpen week” where the academic organisation “HaSS – Handels Students for Sustainability” was collecting donations for the aforementioned occasion. Musikhjälpen is a charity project, where different artists take part in a reality show to collect donations and many small organisations contribute with their own projects and collections. I volunteered during this week and sold coffee and pastry in the cafeteria as well as overlooking the tombola. It felt good to again engage in a social project, after my volunteering and some separate projects during the exchange semesters.

Exchange Semester in Peru

The second semester of my master’s programme, I spent in Lima, Peru at the “Universidad del Pacífico”. During the pandemic, I was already missing the time when I was getting to know the cultures in the Latin American region and that is why I applied for an exchange semester solely to Peru which was the only option on the South American continent. I was so lucky to get accepted and decided to go even though the classes have been announced to only be held online. This is only one reason why the experience during the second exchange semester was different to the first one. Since I met many exchange students that were doing their bachelor’s degree and were studying abroad for the first time, I could see my younger self in their behavior and attitudes. I noted that I had grown personally and that it was easy for me to adapt to local circumstances that in part, I was already familiar with. For the second exchange semester I was trying to have as much contact with Peruvian people as possible and avoid the international or even German “bubble” as I knew how easy it is to get “trapped” in it and not talk to local people in Spanish or try to get to know them. It was even harder this time because of the online courses since every student had their video camera turned off and there was no time to interact before or after class.

One remarkable event during my stay was the qualification soccer match for the World Cup 2022 where pure patriotism and emotions showed. People were completely sure that their home country was going to win the match (many also bet money) and traveled in the hundreds of thousands to Qatar to watch it live. Not being Peruvian I was not as excited as local people and could not imagine the same excitement in Germany. Patriotism is still a bit restrained in Germany possibly because of the World Wars in the past and people do not display their pride that obviously.

Again, this time, I engaged in activities out of the scope of the academic context. Together with a local organisation, the university’s buddies were organising a project in order to help building a retaining wall for a community where earthquakes and landslides were threatening their houses. This day was interesting for me as I got to see the suburbs of the metropole Lima which I almost never went to, living in one of the wealthier and more touristy neighbourhoods of the capital.

Another reflection of my exchange semester is on the concept of “national culture”. Peru is one of the most diverse countries I have ever visited, in different ways, and it is hard to speak of a national culture when one considers the indigenous and remote communities in the Amazon region, in the Highlands, on the Titicaca Lake on the one hand and the urbanised population in cities like Lima and Arequipa on the other hand.