

EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI)
Reflective Portfolio by Maria Ollé Grau
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Reflective Essay

Starting this portfolio I find myself on a 13 hour plane towards Los Angeles, California, still trying to get my head around the fact that I am about to immerse myself in a unique experience. For the last month I have been trying to write this essay on how the intercultural experiences I have been so lucky to endure have resulted in the person I am today. This is a reflection that might be perceived as rather obvious but it wasn't until Eutopia that I fully understood my interest in international experiences, where it comes from and how it shapes my decision making.

My name is Maria Ollé Grau, I am a 21-year-old born and raised in Spain studying a double degree in Law and Business at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) in Barcelona and about to start an exchange programme at the University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA). I am not going to lie, right now I don't feel too secure about my decision of going to study abroad, I feel sad for what I am leaving behind, frightened for what I'm about to encounter and unwilling to face the challenges and adaptations ahead. Therefore, I have decided now is the right moment to press the rewind button to remember why and how I ended up in this plane.

Before starting I want to clarify that the following walk through my life is focused on explaining two main descriptive parts of who I am today: (1) an ecologist activist and (2) an ambitious lawyer to be.

THE STORY OF THE MAKING OF MY INTERNATIONAL MINDSET

My story does not begin like others who have been introduced to interculturalism since their childhood. I was born in a small village an hour from Barcelona with both my parents being Catalan, and my grandparents and my great grandparents. Luckily, my parents have always loved traveling and considered speaking English indispensable.

When I was eleven years old I experienced my first international challenge. My parents decided to send me for a month to a summer school in England on my own, where I lived with an English family. Of all my experiences, this was by far the hardest mainly because of my age and my low English level. For the first time I realized how different life is in every country and within every culture. I remember the first week like it was yesterday. I was in shock, everything was a challenge: weather, food, language, making new friends, missing my parents and especially the everyday cultural differences such as having lunch at 12 pm eating only a sandwich instead of a three course meal, having different rules about when we had to go back home and how, having to stand up when the school principal came into the class, calling the teachers by Miss or Mr and their surname, etcetera. However, at that age our brain is like a sponge, our ability to absorb information allowed me to adapt a lot faster and learn a new language at a faster speed. Four weeks later I did not want to leave. After all the effort I put in fitting in, it was the first time I felt part of a community different from the one I grew up in. People in town knew me, friends invited me to their birthday parties, other parents at the supermarket would recognize me, I would help my host mother cook, and I was even part of their primary school graduation. It was like a second life.

Two years later my parents suggested I repeat that experience but this time in Ireland and for a whole year. I did not hesitate to accept. The cultural shock this time was different. It wasn't as surprising and I didn't feel as alone because there were more Spanish people studying in the same school, although I was a year younger than the others. I think one of the hardest parts of it was the difference in the daily activities between Spanish teenagers and Irish teenagers. For example, having to get back home at 6pm instead of at 9pm, going home after school instead of walking around town with friends or having to tell my host family my future plans instead of deciding last minute. I also found contrasting the way

students divided by gender when establishing their groups of friends while in Spain I was used to having very close boyfriends and a big mixed group.

Long story short, I loved it so much I asked my parents if I could repeat the experience the following year but in America. Sadly that was not viable for them but they offered me the chance to stay another year in Ireland, which I knew was a life changing decision. By staying another year my relation with both communities would dramatically change. In Ireland, the people in my surroundings would go from seeing me as a temporary visitant like so many other Spanish students to seeing me as an actual member who they embraced. On the other hand, I started to miss out on too much back home and as a consequence some friendships were enfeebled. Luckily, I decided to stay. My involvement in the community kept growing and my relationship with my Irish friends and host family got stronger. It feels like I have a second home in Ireland, a second community which I am part of. My own exclusive space that I do not share with anyone from my home surroundings and that in a certain way feels like my little secret.

After two years abroad I felt it was time to go back home but I didn't go back to a closed cultural environment, I had developed an intercultural interest that I did not want to lose so I went to an international school and studied the International Baccalaureate. In my class there were students from China, Russia, France, Italy, England, Singapore and, of course, Spain. Through those two years I realized how interculturalism and diversity help you develop a wider global perspective: there was a very noticeable difference between the teenagers in that class and teenagers that have always studied within the national educational system, in terms of the ease with which they adapted to cultural contrasts. Through my school I participated in the Model United Nations of Nyborg, Denmark (MUNNY). This experience I also consider very awakening for me. I lived for a week with a Danish family where I learned about new cultural differences, but the most interesting part was spending a whole week discussing global political, social and environmental issues such as ways to work towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.



That same year, 2017, I decided I wanted to be a lawyer and decided to finally stop eating meat. In the EUCI seminars I reflected on my international experiences and realized they not only gave me an international mind-set but had a bigger impact on my personality.

On one hand, being challenged since an early age and overcoming all the obstacles I found on my way made me not be afraid of having high aspirations. Having to speak out for myself when I was alone and learning how to communicate most appropriately made me the outspoken and social person I am today. Trying to understand all points of view while maintaining an individual position helped me become more respectful and understanding. Because I had developed this character I started studying harder to get into the Law and Economics degree I'm currently studying and that I feel so passionate about. Seemingly, it is because through the last years I have been determined to achieve my professional goals

that I find myself sitting on a balcony on the beautiful UCLA campus, a place I worked really hard to get to.

I choose to study economics together with law because both areas, despite being academically different, encounter each other in many aspects. Many times the crossdisciplinarity between both fields allows me to interpret and understand law related classes a lot faster through my economics knowledge. At the same time, it is easy to see how in real life they very often work together. For example, in my university I am a member of AEMA, an association of students for the natural environment. The interdisciplinary of my degree allowed me to further understand some of the issues and even be able to give a talk on Circular Economy where I explained how this is a solution that is viable both economically and legally, and I was able to take knowledge from each field and apply it to the other.

After the two years abroad and the international relations I developed over the years, my whole perception towards nationalism changed. I felt the need to keep on travelling, learning about other cultures, every time wanting to travel further. And I soon learned that of course I was Catalan, but I also was Spanish, and therefore European, and basically another citizen in a world we all share. As I grew older this global mindset soon materialized in a further interest towards social issues.

Deciding to be vegetarian is never easy, but it is even harder when you are from a small town, your grandparents are farmers and you are only 16 years old. In order for my family and friends to understand my decision I had to start investigating and learning a lot about climate change. I learned about consumerism and overproduction, about the impact of fast fashion, about plastic and micro plastics, about how the sea is the lungs of the world, etc.



After a year in AEMA, I decided to do more towards ecologism facing local challenges, which inevitably leads to facing global challenges. With a few friends we created an association called LaTevaMerda where we go around different natural spaces such as forests and rivers to pick up trash. We also do other activities such as talks in schools or participations in open table discussions with other associations and also have a substantial international engagement by participating in 1PieceArmy, an international project where worldwide organisations like ours work together in counting all the collected pieces. We are a glocal association, any environmental activist is.

In conclusion, when I first started this essay I was on a plane really upset and scared and wanting to turn around. I didn't feel it was the right moment to leave. Sometimes it is in these cases when the experience is most rewarding. It's been three weeks. I'm not going to lie, it has not been easy. The classes, constant socialising, the prices and tipping, learning by error on a daily basis and the cultural shock, which is a lot stronger than I expected. Before coming I didn't realize how much more challenging an international experience is outside the EU and how noticeable discrepancies in social values and practices are. I can't get used to the number of mentally ill homeless people, gender dynamics are different, and there is no public transport nor public health and no local shops, everything they buy online.

However, just yesterday I had dinner with friends from Israel, Canada, Germany, and Nigeria, and last weekend I went camping for two days with friends from Canada, Belgium, and Germany to visit one of the most beautiful national parks I have ever seen. How amazing is that? Also American people are incredibly welcoming and helpful, very understanding and a lot more open than what I expected. It has been the craziest and probably most intense three weeks of my life, even more so than when I left for Ireland. I'm starting to realise that what I thought was pausing my life back home for half a year is actually a once in lifetime experience that will make me grow at a frightening but fascinating speed and I could not be more grateful for it.

COVER LETTER

I am a Spanish student at Pompeu Fabra University of Barcelona, where I got the opportunity to participate in the EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI). This project caught my attention because I wanted to meet worldwide students with whom I shared similar international interests. Little did I know it would lead me to have an introspective analysis on how all my previous international experiences have moulded my personality and motivated my professional career. Through my portfolio I try to convey that same reflective process on my life experiences to the reader, focusing on the four EUCI learning outcomes.

1. Intercultural

I have been lucky enough to have encountered many intercultural experiences since an early age. When I was eleven years old I went for a month at a summer school in England with a host family knowing hardly any English. I remember being in shock and having to put a lot of effort into adapting to the food, the weather, the different day routine, the new friends, etc. However, I loved it, the fulfilment I felt after surpassing the obstacles and feeling part of a new community was unparalleled. Therefore, two years later I decided to repeat the experience but for a full year in Ireland. The cultural shock this time was different, since Irish and English culture aren't that different it wasn't as surprising as the first time. In the end I stayed for two years and had the best experience of my life, sacrificing a Spanish adolescence but gaining an Irish one instead. The next intercultural key experience I had was my new home school. Going back I decided to change schools and go to an international one and to study the International Baccalaureate, departing from the national educational system, and I met people from all around the world: China, Russia, France, Italy, Singapore, etc. Finally, I currently find myself in a 5 months exchange programme in the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA). After a month I can say it has been the most culturally different place I have ever adapted to, being outside the EU the differences are very noticeable. At the same time, the international mind-set all students share in common, all being from very different cultures, results in something very inspiring and motivational.

2. Intersectoral

I believe I have strongly accomplished the intersectoral outcome mainly from my interdisciplinary degree. I decided to study a Double Degree in Law and Economics because although the areas are academically different they encounter each other in many occasions. Through studying both I have achieved a wider point of view and further understanding on how society operates. The cross-disciplinarity between fields often allows me to learn faster in one area through the previously acquired knowledge in the other. Seemingly, in many occasions in practice they work together. The interdisciplinarity of my degree has allowed me to have a deeper understanding on social issues, for example, as a climate change activist I have given talks on Circular Economy applying both an economic and legal point of view.

3. Challenge-based

International experiences will always be challenging in different aspects. As previously stated, the first time abroad was the hardest but as I have grown and gone through more international experiences, every time has become easier. It is through the making of my international mindset that I developed a sense of responsibility towards social issues that affect the whole world, such as feminism and ecologism. The more you learn about other cultures and other communities the more you understand how thin the line is between a local and a global issue. Personally the last 6 years I have become very involved in fighting against climate change. As a member of AEMA, an association of students for the natural environment in UPF, we look for an informed and aware future generation with an eco-friendly perspective that can have a major global impact in the present and the future. Moreover, with a few friends we created an association called LaTevaMerda where we go around different natural spaces such as forests and rivers to pick up trash. The association also has a substantial international engagement by participating in IPieceArmy, an international project where worldwide organisations like ours work together in counting all the collected pieces. We like to consider ourselves a “glocal”

project because our action is very focused on local surroundings but our overall aim is to solve a global issue.

4. Reflective

I never had stopped to reflect upon how my international experiences have impacted me until EUCI. As a result of the seminars I came to understand that a big part of me, of my professional and personal decisions, have derived from my international mindset. Because of it I broke down the nationalist perspective I had on global issues and ended up being a vegetarian, not consuming fast fashion and avoiding plastics as much as possible, sometimes stretching myself as thin as possible because society is changing too slowly. I decided to study the Double Degree because being challenged since an early age and overcoming obstacles made me not be afraid of having high aspirations. I developed a character through having to be outspoken, decisive, respectful, understanding and consequently I started working very hard to end up studying the degree I feel so passionate about.

CONCLUSION

Starting my portfolio I was in a plane towards Los Angeles, scared and unwilling to do the adaptation process and effort of moving into a different culture. However, writing this essay made me realize how much each international experience has given me and how this one would be just as life changing. I thought I was pausing my life back home for half a year when in fact I'm living a once in lifetime experience that will make me grow at a frightening but fascinating speed, and I could not be more grateful for it.

