



# *EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation 2022*

## *Reflective Portfolio*

VUB

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## Cover Letter

I am Hiva, 28 years old, a master's student in Biomedical Engineering at VUB University. My experience of living in an international environment and abroad began not only last year in Belgium, but many years ago. When I was in my last year of high school, my family and I decided to immigrate from Iran to Malaysia, which was a pleasant country with a tropical climate. I will never forget the experiences of those days. Leaving all friends and relatives and starting a new life may not be easy for a teenager at that age, but when I look back now, maybe a teenager of that age could have coped with new conditions and environments more easily. Because she has less lived experience and therefore probably has fewer dependencies, it can be easier to cope with losing them. I spent only one year living and studying in Malaysia and after that, we returned to Iran. But after I returned to my country, I had a constant excitement for another migration.

So, I decided to immigrate to another country to continue my studies. Before that, I searched and considered different universities and countries, but finally, I chose VUB University, which is located in Brussels, the capital of Europe. This path was not without any hardness for me, as I lost my father, who was my constant supporter, just 8 months before my migration. That's why it was really difficult for me to enter Belgium and be separated from my family and friends in those circumstances. But I made a decision despite all the difficulties. Let's deal with it! Because I knew that the path I have walked on and what is waiting for me will be a clear path full of growth.

Before I arrived in Brussels, I had applied for university dormitories, and luckily, I had the chance to receive the dormitories as soon as I arrived in Brussels. The experience of living in the dormitories gave me the chance to meet and live with people of different nationalities, beliefs and religions and I was able to find very good friends who have now become my family. I call them my family because like members of a family, we spend most of our time together, we watch movies, we talk about our interests and beliefs, and the culture and history of our country, and we celebrate our ceremonies together, and we even cry together! Maybe before that, it was hard for me to imagine that one day I would want to talk about my feelings, sorrows and joys in a language other than my mother tongue with a person from another country, but now it has become a part of my life. Because it's hard to find words that can express your feelings, especially for me who has only spoken in my mother tongue for almost all 27 years of my life. But little by little, I realized that the transfer of feelings is not only through words. You can even express your feelings by choosing the simplest words because a sense of empathy is also important. I have also improved more and more in English every day, this has made it easier for me to communicate with my friends and talk about different topics.

Of course, living in any country has challenges that the people of that country can better understand and have better solutions for those challenges. Living in a dormitory has given me the chance to befriend and live with a Belgian student, and in many cases when I encounter a problem or have a question, they kindly guide me and always provide the best solutions and help me.

One of the biggest challenges that educational migration had for me was the cost of living and education, because the exchange rate of my country's currency to the Euro is very low. That's why after I arrived in Belgium, I decided to find a job and after a short time, I was successful in finding one. I got to work in Caspian Tradition, a caviar production and distribution company in Waterloo, one of the French-speaking cities in Belgium. My responsibility in this company was to supervise the packaging and labelling department. But this was accompanied by new challenges for me. Language! Because some of the employees of this company, who were originally from other countries, could only speak their mother tongue and French, as a result, we had no common language to communicate with each other. I had to deal with them and finally, it led to the fact that not only did I learn French (not

completely but to some extent), but also the English of other employees grew a lot during this period. As a result, we were able to overcome this problem, with an opportunity for a new achievement.

One of the biggest lessons I learned from participating in this activity was the importance of language knowledge. How to communicate with more people by knowing more languages, understanding their culture and getting closer to them. Something that is certainly not possible without knowing the language and communicating verbally.

At the beginning of my entry into this company, language was not my only challenge. In my country, manual work is usually for men and women usually do lighter work. But it was interesting to me that here, whether in this company or anywhere else, women are engaged in heavy and manual work like men. Most of this job was heavy manual work. Sometimes the weight of some products reached 10 kg or even more and it was necessary to move them in order to label and prepare them for mailing. This caused my physical resistance to increase little by little. Apart from this, I was also responsible for coordinating and checking the correctness of other people's work, which increased the accuracy of my work and insight. Because the mistake of others was my mistake.

One of the concerns of the world today is life and land, which is what was discussed a lot in the EUCI program. It may seem at first that such companies that distribute marine and animal products can be a threat to life and land. They may be, but maybe not always! I saw firsthand how this company refused to buy and distribute a high-quality and very expensive type of cheese, which was produced from a very rare species of deer in Sweden, because they believed that this cycle can cause the early extinction of this species of deer.

Another concern of the world today is no poverty, zero hunger and quality of education. Caspian Tradition organizes many charities every year where people from different parts of the world gather and think of solutions for people in need, especially children in need, and try to improve the quality of education for underprivileged children. Of course, zero hunger and no poverty may seem unattainable, but we can try to minimize it and get close to it. I had the chance to meet benevolent people, and since I always have such concerns and had the experience of teaching orphaned children in a local kindergarten, it was the best opportunity to meet with an international and global community that has the same concerns as mine and find ways to get rid of these problems.

VUB University, like other EUTOPIA universities, is an open-minded and concerned university. My group and I, which consisted of 4 other people of Belgian, Moroccan, Indian and Tanzanian nationalities, were responsible for finding a solution to one of today's problems, good health and well-being. In this project, we had to find a solution for diabetic foot ulcers, which many people suffer from nowadays and can cause limb amputation and even death. So, we got together and despite all the differences in attitude, we tried to design a product that can detect foot ulcers in diabetics before they occur and give the patients the opportunity to treat them as soon as possible in order to reduce the risk of limb amputation or death. These differences in culture and manners showed their positive aspects well in this project. For example, you may have heard that Indian people are very hardworking and tireless. This trait was completely visible in my cohort. Many times when the other members of the group did not have enough energy, he could continue well and made the work continue. Our Tanzanian group member was full of energy and happy, and when we were tired, he knew how to bring energy back to the group with his jokes. It was interesting that both in my country and in Morocco there were traditional methods for the treatment of diabetic foot ulcers, which led to the addition of new and interesting ideas to the project.

During the design of this product, I also participated in the EUCI program, and there I got to know more about the concept of sustainability. This made me convey to my group that we should consider sustainability in our designs. We used sub-elements to produce our main product with the least damage to the environment, with the ability to be recycled and used again, and to have the most durability and efficiency in order to reduce the consumption of raw materials, which made it noticed and praised by professors.

Getting to know EUTOPIA was very useful for me. Because by passing the EUCI program, I had the opportunity to discuss the problems of the world with people from different parts of Europe. It is interesting that EUTOPIA Week was held at my university, VUB, this year and I had the chance to meet new people. This week, various interesting and exciting programs were held and I had the chance to participate in two of them. One was artificial intelligence and the other was a swimming day at the VUB pool. Since my field is Biomedical Engineering and my field is robotics, this artificial intelligence day was very interesting and useful for me, and on the swimming day I was able to swim with my new friends and have a good time together. Another non-academic international experience!

## Reflective Essay

### Introduction

I got acquainted with EUTOPIA through my university, Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Since my master's in this university was one of being placed in an international environment, this course, the EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation, had a significant positive impact on how I dealt with this situation. In this essay, I'm going to talk about my activities in a reflective way. Specifically, I'm going to talk about the intercultural and intersectoral activities and experiences that I had in an international environment, including 1) working for five months in a Belgian company, 2) holding one of the Iranian ancient festivals in Belgium and participating in celebrations and festivals and 3) doing a project in the form of a group whose members were from different countries and continents. I will also talk about the challenges that I faced during these activities.

### Intercultural

In Iran, one of our most important ancient festivals is the spring festival. We celebrate the beginning of spring for the new year and we have a festival for the end of winter where we light a fire and jump over it, and while jumping over the fire we sing a poem that says "I will burn all the evils of the previous year in the fire and I will receive warmth and light from the fire for the new year."

I and the rest of the Iranians in the university held this celebration on the university campus and I invited other students, who were Belgian and Romanian, to attend this celebration. This celebration and our culture were very attractive to them and this made us get closer to each other, they even prepared one of the traditional Iranian dishes for this celebration, which was very attractive and valuable for me and my Iranian friends.

It was an opportunity to learn more about each other's cultures and I realized that one of their most important celebrations is Easter. Since I had little information about it, I researched and tried to implement its rituals to some extent for them. So, I gave them colored eggs and rabbit-shaped chocolates as gifts. It is interesting that Iranians also put colored eggs on the New Year's table in the New Year, which is the beginning of spring. We also noticed that both in Romania and Iran, people eat fish at the start of spring and wear green and red clothes. Now we are much closer to each other and we know that despite all the differences, including borders and languages, we have a lot in common.



Image 1: my birthday dinner with my fellow students

## Intersectoral

I worked for five months in Caspian Tradition, a caviar distribution company in Waterloo, one of the French-speaking cities in Belgium. During this time, I oversaw the packaging and labelling department. The employees of this department were people with Belgian nationality but with origins from other countries, such as Portuguese, Moroccan, Cambodian, etc. When I first entered this company, I was only able to speak my mother tongue and English. But there was a problem, and that was that some of these people couldn't understand and speak English and were only able to speak in their mother tongue and French. So, I had to use Google Translate or ask people who knew English and French to convey my words to them. But after a short period, it made me learn French (not completely but to some extent) and they learned English, because we often asked each other how this phrase is expressed in English and French. This was a win-win experience.



Image 2: New year's ceremony with my colleagues

Another of my experiences of being placed in an international environment was a project in which I was in a group with four other people from different countries including Belgium, Morocco, Tanzania and India. The goal of this group was to find a solution to predict diabetic foot ulcers. Finally, we achieved very good results and we were able to design a smart mat that was noticed by professors. This experience proved to me that people with different nationalities, different skin colors, different languages and different perspectives can work together for a goal and achieve the best results.



Image 3: my teammates for the diabetic foot ulcers project

### Challenge-based

When people are placed in international environments, they face challenges whether they like it or not. But how you deal with them is very important. One of the most important characteristics of a person that can help people in this category is flexibility and tolerance, and this is exactly what has been strengthened in me after my educational migration abroad, and it was also discussed a lot in the EUCI.

One of the cultural shocks that I encountered at the beginning of my arrival in Belgium was mixed toilets. I encountered this subject for the first time in my university library. At first, it may have been strange for me, but when I realized the reasons and its respective notion of the rights of transgender people, I was even happy to study in an environment that has such concerns and strives for the rights of all types of people. This made me research more about this issue and I even participated in the

Pride Week festivals and found friends there. Such a challenge made me develop my personality and increase my knowledge, as well as expand the range of my friends and people around me.

### Conclusion

As social beings, people always try to expand their social relationships and experiences. Placing people in new environments and conditions has always been accompanied by challenges, and international environments can be one of the most challenging of these environments. In the meantime, how to face these challenges depends on the flexibility and tolerance of people. In this portfolio, I reviewed my international experiences and activities in the form of a reflective essay in three different sections including intercultural, intersectoral and challenge-based.