

THE JOURNEY STARTS

We can trace Internationalisation back to history through the trade of products, exchange of services, borrowing, or knowledge transfer. Thus, internationalisation has always been part of human curiosity about other places, cultures, languages, beliefs, commodities, or landscapes. Likewise, it has had a direct impact on the world's development. In my case, Internationalisation started at my home university, the Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca (UABJO) at the Centro de Idiomas (Languages Center), located in sunny Oaxaca City in Southern Mexico. A city rich in culture, languages, and ecosystems but complex in its sociopolitical, economic, and educational systems. Thus, today's Faculty of Languages, where I completed my Bachelor studies in Teaching English as a Second Language, used to gather outstanding local and international scholars with exceptional quality in Anthropology, Linguistics, Pedagogy, English Literature, Morphology, and Cultural studies. This small faculty was an open place promoting continuous learning, new forms of learning-teaching, international exchange of knowledge, and new interactions with professors and students from different universities in the US and Europe. Of course, this was a common practice in Oaxaca since the city and state of Oaxaca have always attracted many tourists and people worldwide due to its exceptional diversity in culture, languages, gastronomy, and ecosystems- most of them collapsing entirely today.

Then, due to my curiosity about learning English in a native setting and exploring other cultures, it was in 2004 that I applied to an exchange program at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, Michigan, US, and I was granted a full scholarship for a year. So, my dream of studying and living abroad came true. However, the price of being one of the prominent students at my home university was a challenging task since I used to study the university program only on Saturdays and work full time from Mondays to Fridays. But, the great advantage of this was that I was used to being organized, disciplined, and keeping good planning. Although, the downside was that I hardly had time to party. Nevertheless, after meeting so many friendly and exciting Spanish exchange students at my home university, I was ready to experience the study-learning system in the US, living on campus, traveling on spring break, volunteering for NGOs, getting a summer job after my exchange studies, and even understanding what feeling *homesick* meant.

Thus, in September 2004, I started my role as an international Kalamazoo College (K-College) student with other international students from Mexico, Spain, Ecuador, Germany, Japan, France, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. We, international students, attended our classes depending on requirements from our universities, minors, majors, and academic interests. We tended to meet at the K-zoo cafeteria to share dinner or hang out to study and support each other. For me and other first international students, getting used to winter, self-studies, and isolation from others was tough, especially when we needed to stay up late at night to cope with our demanding study plans and meet the almost impossible deadlines. As the year went by, I learned to manage my time better and include more social activities in my schedule. So, on one side, I was dedicated full-time to my academic activities, my duty as a Spanish Teaching Assistant (TA), which implied assisting a professor from the Romance Languages by giving workshops, making socio-cultural presentations about Mexico, and supporting other K-zoo students with their homework and Spanish language development.

Consequently, I realized that being born in Mexico as a native Spanish speaker was favorable. I did not fit into the stereotypes of postponing things for tomorrow, being less educated, or thinking that English was impossible to learn. Due to this, I began to explore my identity, traditions, and culture from a more analytical and reflective perspective. Moreover, these reflections enriched my interest in learning and socializing with other American students and professors from diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and disciplines to expand my perspective on American and Mexican lifestyles. I taught my students and colleagues that Mexico was more than just tacos, mariachis, and tequila. Soon, I also understood that flavors, smells, and colors do not mean the same for everybody, nor does the weather or the meaning of warmth, friendship, or darkness. However, in between, I could not deny that living on campus and staying away from my family and close friends led to a *culture shock*— a *homesick* feeling, solitude, and the first experience of winter blues in the coldest winter ever in Michigan. This was a turning point when I started to comprehend the meaning of being divided into two worlds—one familiar to you, where you feel loved and heartwarming, and the other that is interesting and challenging but feels distant all the time. However, I have always had the great fortune of finding exceptional and wise people who have shared their love, knowledge, and time with me, and we have created strong bonds of friendship beyond borders and stereotypes. Shortly, I found it entirely meaningful to be an exchange student in the US, and similarly, I became more confident and determined. I invested more time practicing the language without any fear. I adopted more effective studying strategies and learned the value of collaboration and mutual support. I dared to sign up for courses I had not experienced before, such as fencing, kickboxing, and yoga. To a full extent, all these habits led to managing my time, money, and resources more efficiently. On top of that, I

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participated in a Spring festival organized by the Hindi Student Association, and it was a fabulous experience to dance at the Kalamazoo Theater with my friends and other American students. I became more familiar with my American roommates and developed a closer relationship with my wonderful host family, keen on Mexican culture, gastronomy, cultural activities, and knowledge sharing.

Since my curiosity to experience a summer job in the US was still alive, my host family and K-College staff helped me enroll in a summer job as a camp leader at the Sherman Lake YMCA. It was a magic, fun, multicultural, fascinating, and demanding experience where I met fabulous people and created memorable learning experiences with the international staff and the fantastic campers in the unique forest landscape surrounding Sherman Lake. This experience opened my eyes to a new perception of childhood and youth development, two crucial stages in human development that are the paths to the construction of adults that we are today. It was inspiring to see how the little and the young campers could recognize and overcome their fears, anxiety, or worries and strengthen their self-esteem, determination, and self-love, and this could lead to more friendly beings with a strong sense of care and cooperation with themselves and others. Sooner than later, the summer of 2005 ended with even more learnings and experiences that I acknowledge as an international student and a summer worker in the US.

Finally, I found myself fascinated with this challenging and enriching experience of living and studying abroad at a liberal arts college, with enough confidence, higher self-esteem, and awareness of other people with diverse cultural backgrounds, lifestyles, attitudes, and life experiences. This year challenged my previous conceptions about my culture; I overcame stereotypes about Mexicans and built a broader perspective on other cultures, lifestyles, and languages. It was a year of academic development, personal lessons, cultural features, unique outdoor activities, and knowledge sharing. This was an unforgettable experience of internationalisation that happened to be a turning point that positively impacted my life at individual, educational, and future professional levels in the birth of social media and the digital era.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

A new opportunity came after my first experience abroad in 2004 as an international K-College student. It was my first time in Europe, during the summer of 2006, when I participated in a new exchange program between my home university, the Faculty of Languages (Facultad de Idiomas) UABJO in Oaxaca, Mexico, and the Bremen Universität in Bremen, Germany. I was pleased to explore the European continent, especially the historic, vibrant, and cultural city of Bremen in Germany. I was curious about the embracement of organization, discipline, and environmental awareness adopted by the German culture. I was part of a small group of 3 students and our German professor who preferred to establish her roots in Oaxaca, Mexico, and share her German culture, knowledge, and language with students from a festive culture, colorful gastronomy, tropical weather, and the heritage of great civilizations part of the complex but rich History of Mexico. Thus, we all four organized and prepared our workshops, presentations, and Spanish lessons. In addition, we brought some examples of our Mexican gastronomy to share with a group of German students from the Department of Languages at the Bremen Universität. However, this time, it was only a summer program for a month, which included staying with a German host family, speaking German every day, and attending the university to complete our academic duties. I was keen to embark on a new adventure abroad, mainly because, this time, my cultural immersion would imply being part of a family's routines and activities, helping them with the house chores, but also attending to my academic duties at the university during the summer. It felt overwhelming, but I was fascinated by the idea of the whole experience. So, when I received the printed tickets and all the instructions to complete our exchange program in Germany, I felt like the happiest person ever. The idea of being prepared to fly for long hours and the fact that an airplane could transport so many passengers from one continent to another and cross the Atlantic Ocean at night was too incredible and captivating to me at the same time. It felt like a historical event, discovering the European continent in the 19th Century with sparkling eyes of curiosity, eager to learn and experience other cultures part of a vast continent, meet new people, speak different languages, and get to know other lifestyles and educational systems.

So, once we landed in Bremen, Germany, our host families were already waiting for us, and contrary to German stereotypes, our host families were warmly welcoming, open-minded, interested in learning from our culture and traditions, healthy and fun. So, to start the mornings, we used to wake up early, prepare breakfast, eat together, clean up the table, and get ready to bike with my host mother and his little son to drop him at school. Then, it was time for our German lessons together. These lessons ranged from her exciting perspective on life and her choice of being vegetarian, choosing ecological local products, and creating her own recipes for conserving foods and marmalades because the German winters do not offer

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fresh local fruits or vegetables all year around to jumping- into conversations on German history, European geography, the German working environment, the school system, and the differences and similitudes between Mexico and Germany. Moreover, these lessons were reinforced with short visits to Bremen City and other outdoor activities like swimming, biking, and walking. I was impressed by the tidiness and organization of the society—the cleanliness of the streets, the recycling stations, and the punctuality of the buses and trains.

Besides this, the fact that nature was well-preserved everywhere was fascinating and evoked a sense of freedom and happiness. I was also delighted that a bike was considered a means of transportation. I could bike everywhere safely and even take the bike on the train and the ferry to travel to other places in Germany and neighboring countries if I wished to. For the first time, I felt free to be a girl and explore new landscapes by bike. This experience felt so perfect to be real because it was a different story back home, in the wrongly called 'third world.' Thus, after a few days and the effects of the jetlag, I felt like one of the mannequins in one of the window-shopping landscapes—seeing life passing like an astonishing catwalk showing the most diverse nationalities, languages, lifestyles, and outfits. I was like one of those charming mannequins that seemed to be experiencing each life scene on one of the most iconic and well-known Bremen's main streets, Böttcherstraße, on a warm summer. But this is how intense and fascinating it was to experience the culture, life, people, and society of Bremen from the perspective of a Mexican university student.

But what about my academic duties? Yes, they were relatively demanding. The German students were engaged and committed to learning Spanish, listening to our lectures and presentations, and participating in our gastronomic and cultural workshops. However, it was disappointing that the exchange program could not be developed further due to the international negative image and violent conditions that emerged in Oaxaca City during the summer of 2006. This was a socio-political conflict that resulted from a teacher's union strike that started as a demand for better working conditions, proper teaching facilities, more resources for quality education, and educational development for the students, especially for those working and living in the rural areas of the state of Oaxaca. However, this strike claiming quality education and fair working conditions resulted in a turbulent and complicated socio-political conflict that lasted longer than expected. Nevertheless, despite our efforts to do our best at the Bremen Universität and the strong interest from the host university staff and students, our exchange program ended after our summer exchange program. Yet, the best part of this experience was discovering another academic system, healthier ways of living, a strong awareness of the human impact on the environment, and bicycles as a means of transportation and part of the German lifestyle.

Ultimately, my summer experience as an international student in Germany included deeper socio-cultural, educational, and linguistic experiences. I was fortunate to be part of a family where I learned how many similarities we have in our social interactions as human beings, where respect, love, and discipline are the basis for creating harmony in a family, helping with the daily routines, and interacting with each other. I also understood that even though the educational systems in Mexico and Germany differ from each other to a great degree, different learning perspectives are needed to continue developing knowledge and quality education for all. Thus, even though our worlds and landscapes look incredibly different when comparing Germany and Mexico, it is possible to say that we are all interconnected, and the significant differences in our countries are not human features but social, economic, and political elements created by other humans to make us look different from each other.

THE JOURNEY HERE AND NOW

After these two academic experiences abroad in the U.S. and Germany and while working with a Swedish company as a tour leader director in Mexico, I wondered about the origins of the Vikings and never-ending summer nights, the Midnight Summers, and the lifestyles of societies in Scandinavia. In this case, the experience of internationalisation and intercultural communication started in my home country, Mexico-where I had close contact with people with multicultural backgrounds and international perspectives through my work and studies. Thus, in 2017, I moved to Sweden and started studying a one-year Master's programme in Nordic Welfare-Health and Lifestyle-a brand new and unique international programme at Halmstad University in Sweden. In this case, I lived off campus, and the cultural shock in Sweden was more intense than my first experience at Kalamazoo College in the US. However, living off-campus brought me extraordinary opportunities to learn the language more quickly and experience Swedish society before it transitioned to mainly becoming digitalized, as it is today.

Then, my studies on Nordic Welfare-Health and Lifestyle and my Master Thesis allowed me to discover the efforts and cooperation of the Nordic regions (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland), especially from Sweden, in a more

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in-depth manner. For instance, the hardship conditions of Swedish society during and after the Second World War, the story of the migration of almost 1 million Swedes to the U.S. due to extreme poverty and lack of employment, as well as the antecedents of foreign labor imported to work in Sweden, and the challenges people have always faced to build a social welfare system (which is not for free) within a democratic framework aiming to provide quality education, social, economic and environmental benefits, plus health care for all. I enjoyed learning and experiencing Swedish society, its welfare system, and its natural landscapes. Although concerning the link between my Master's studies in Nordic Welfare and the labor market in Sweden, it seemed like my program was not precisely among the most popular ones since people looked at me quite, wondering what I was talking about. Hence, I immediately got questions like, Are these studies relevant to getting a job in Sweden as a foreigner? What kind of job can you get when you graduate? Or What exactly are you becoming after completing your studies? This last question was often expected when talking among locals, and the problem here was that I was not familiar with the job positions and names in the Swedish labor market, not even aware that my studies would not lead directly to any job position that foreigners were not part of. Soon, I started realizing that even though my studies had a strong connection with Swedish society, in praxis, the situation was much more complicated, especially for a foreign female entrepreneur with an international profile and a multidisciplinary background in tourism, arts, culture and higher education coming from Mexico City. I also ignored that Mexico was still considered a 'poor country,' a dangerous place,' part of the 'underdeveloped world,' and located in South America. What a misconception! Although, it was a popular destination among Swedish travelers due to its warm climate, friendly people, mariachis, and tasty tacos. Thus, despite the relatively 'low relevance' of my studies in Nordic Welfare and my multidisciplinary profile for the Swedish labor market, in my personal experience, these studies were a turning point in my academic life and international experience that led me to strengthen my interest in becoming a researcher.

Furthermore, when looking at the academic dimension as a Master's student in Nordic Welfare, I must highlight my fantastic experiences with my professors and other international students at academic, professional, and personal levels. Besides this, after completing my studies and publishing my Master's thesis, I was invited to collaborate further with the Master's programme in Nordic Welfare at Halmstad University. I performed different roles, such as an International Advisory Board Member (Alumni), a Guest Lecturer, and an Assistant Professor for the Research Methods course. On top of that, my engagement and interest in higher education quality, plus my ability to create trustful and long-term international relationships, led the program director and me to participate in a podcast episode with a UK-based company working with well-being solutions. Our episode was about the relevance of the Master programme in Nordic Welfare-Health and Lifestyle and the opportunities and challenges in the Swedish Lifestyle and Welfare System. This was a great and fulfilling experience where I could understand the dimensions of Nordic Welfare and its perceptions in Sweden and abroad. Similarly, it was an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on the importance of engagement, teamwork, higher-quality education, continuous learning, and trustful and long-term relationships.

Despite this incredible experience, the downside came after completing my duties with the Nordic Welfare programme and looking for a full-time job as a high foreign professional in Sweden. It was a tough and very challenging time since the jobs available for immigrants were mostly as dishwashers, cleaners, servers, or caregiver assistants in elderly homes. While the Swedish language was a barrier for many immigrants, for me, the language acquisition occurred smoothly since I knew (from my previous international experiences) that when a learner is immersed in the host culture and practices the language in different contexts in their everyday life, it contributes to master the foreign language effortlessly. Thus, I started my odyssey to experience Sweden's labor market and welfare system. First, I began as a Spanish language coach with private lessons, then as an assistant in an elderly home. After this, I worked in a cleaning company during the COVID-19 pandemic, and until today, I have been working in the restaurant and hospitality industry at different levels in Sweden, and most of these employments have been completed in Swedish. After a while, I understood that working from scratch was a requirement for everybody aspiring to get a "good job" in Sweden, and I was not the exception, but I was part of the social expectations. Over and above that, during this journey, I met many highly educated people who experienced the same situation and even faced the unexpected side of Swedish society with its sparkles of racist attitudes, nepotism, and gender inequality. These attitudes led to symptoms of depression and frustration for many of us. Nonetheless, I continued upgrading my studies while working in the so-called 'low-qualified' jobs during this journey. Consequently, I developed new interests that led me to engage with sustainability.

Therefore, today, I am a second-year master's degree student in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at the University of Gothenburg. While I am fascinated by studying this program, I am also aware of the enormous challenges we have as a human race to achieve egalitarian quality education and inclusive and sustainable societies for all globally. However, I feel proud to be part of a higher education institution that challenges the status quo of our global societies, fosters quality education and lifelong learning, and develops international higher education programs in alliance with other European universities. As a result of this, I was thrilled to participate in one of the university's international and intercultural programs, TeamWork EUTOPIA 2024. As part of this program, I could collaborate with other talented students (part of the EUTOPIA

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Alliance) with multidisciplinary backgrounds to complete a business project for a global company in the UK during the summer of 2024. Despite achieving effective teamwork and high-quality deliverables that exceeded expectations, we also strengthened our soft and hard skills, such as project management, planning, cross-cultural communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. It was a challenging experience in which I could understand the value of listening to others actively, being open to new perspectives, and becoming more confident working virtually for a global company in an intercultural context. For this reason, I am willing to work for quality education for all and achieve more sustainable and inclusive global businesses and societies through meaningful local and international collaborations.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my self-determination to dare to go abroad, be open to (re) learn about other realities, and experience a world through the lenses of multiculturalism and respect. Thank you, University of Gothenburg, EUTOPIA TeamWork, and EUCI, for encouraging international students to be resilient, become stronger and more confident, and share knowledge to learn new global perspectives. Last but not least, thank you to all of you who have made the writing and publication of this Reflective Portfolio on Internationalization possible.