



University of *Ljubljana*

Reflective Essay – EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI)

Author: Eva Toplišek

Date: July 2025

I come from Slovenia, a small country in Central Europe, and growing up, I was surrounded by different cultural influences—through school, travel, and my family’s interest in exploring new places and cuisines. Language learning was encouraged in both the educational system and my household, but I didn’t fully appreciate its importance until later. As a child, I sometimes saw it as a challenge among many others. Over time, however, I came to realise that knowing multiple languages is not just a practical skill but a powerful tool for connection and understanding. These early experiences planted the seeds for a deeper interest in intercultural learning, which fully blossomed in 2024/25 - by far the most internationally oriented year of my life. Through an Erasmus+ exchange in Berlin and participation in two collaborative student projects under the INDUSAC association, I had the opportunity to explore new environments, learn from diverse teams, and reflect on my own growth.

My exchange semester in Berlin was the most transformative experience of my academic journey to date. I had dreamed of studying in Berlin for several years, largely due to my long-standing interest in the German language and culture. When I applied at the end of 2023 and listed Berlin as my first choice, I was anxious and uncertain, aware that many other students had also selected this vibrant city. When I found out I had been accepted, I felt overwhelming joy and gratitude.

I moved to Berlin in September 2024, sharing a flat with a fellow Slovenian schoolmate, who quickly became one of my closest friends, and another international roommate. It was the first time I had ever lived away from home. At first, I felt nervous and somewhat unsure, but I soon realised how liberating it was to live in a large, multicultural city. I was struck by the openness, creativity, and acceptance I encountered. People in Berlin seemed more relaxed in expressing themselves artistically, musically, and socially compared to what I was used to back home.

That said, the experience wasn’t without challenges. As I interacted with German peers, I encountered noticeable cultural differences. While international students were often outgoing and eager to meet new people, many Germans seemed more reserved at first. I recall attending a birthday party with my Polish friend, hosted by a German acquaintance, where no one was welcoming or wanted to engage in conversation with us. We weren’t fluent or confident enough in German at the time, so made us feel excluded and uncomfortable - something I had never felt so strongly before. It temporarily discouraged me from initiating new connections. However, this feeling gradually faded as I later met two wonderful German students, who were the complete opposite: welcoming, inclusive, and encouraging. That contrast taught me not to generalise and helped restore my confidence in cross-cultural friendships.

Academically, I was excited but slightly intimidated by the idea of studying entirely in English or German. German university culture surprised me in positive ways: students were generally very engaged, actively contributing to discussions and showing genuine interest in the subjects. This contrasted with my experience in Slovenia, where classes often follow a more lecture-based format with limited interaction.

Although I only had one course fully in German, it challenged me the most. While I had been learning the language for years, I wasn't yet fluent. I still experienced occasional "brain zaps," especially when switching between multiple languages. During one seminar, where fast-paced group discussion was expected, I became overwhelmed. I excused myself and asked to speak in English, which I felt more confident in during stressful moments. That experience made me realise that my German still needed improvement and that enrolling in a German-only master's programme might not be realistic just yet. However, it didn't discourage me, but instead motivated me to continue learning. I took weekly German lessons, as I have been doing for the past few years, via Zoom and actively sought ways to practise in everyday situations.

Over time, I adapted to Berlin life and felt increasingly independent and self-assured. My Slovenian flatmate, who is also half-Croatian, introduced me to Croatian music and culture. I also grew close with our Vietnamese roommate, who was initially very quiet and distant, possibly reflecting Scandinavian social norms, as she had been living in Norway for almost her whole life. But over time, we bonded through shared meals, cultural exchanges, and daily interactions. She taught me some Vietnamese and Norwegian, and I shared with her Slovenian words and traditions in return. These simple moments of everyday cultural exchange made the experience richer and more meaningful.

What fascinated me most was discovering similarities between cultures. Through friendships with Polish students, I noticed shared Slavic values and traditions. I also found common ground with German peers, particularly a love for outdoor activities and hiking. Berlin's multicultural atmosphere gave me a new appreciation for my own heritage. While I spoke mostly English in my everyday life there, I became more aware of how beautiful and unique the Slovenian language is. I felt lucky to be able to use it when meeting fellow Slovenians in the city, which helped ease homesickness and brought a sense of belonging and identity in a foreign environment.

One particularly special moment was celebrating my birthday abroad. The friends I made during my time in Berlin came together to make the day unforgettable. It made me realise how deeply human connection transcends national and linguistic boundaries. Later, while attending music festivals across Europe after my exchange, I randomly ran into people I had first met in Berlin. These small, serendipitous encounters confirmed how connected the world can be, and how impactful international friendships truly are.

After my exchange semester ended in March 2025, I was eager to continue engaging in multicultural environments. When I discovered the opportunity to participate in the INDUSAC student projects, offered through my university as part of the alliance between a few European universities, I applied immediately, even though I didn't know anyone who had taken part before. I participated in two projects related to marketing, an area I'm passionate about and which aligns with my academic focus. Both challenges involved solving real-world problems for Slovenian companies, one being Rokus Klett, a book publisher, and the other IKEA's Slovenian market. I worked with students from various countries, including Serbia, Bosnia and North Macedonia. In one of the projects, I served as the group leader, which required clear communication, coordination, and compromise.

During the Rokus Klett project execution, I vividly remember the final meeting we had with two representatives from the publishing company just before the submission deadline. We had experienced some stress throughout the project due to overlapping university responsibilities and exam preparation, but during that meeting, we were told how impressed they were with our work and organisation. That moment filled us with pride and joy. We felt seen, appreciated, and encouraged one another wholeheartedly. Despite the pressure, we stayed supportive and collaborative, and in the end, our teamwork paid off.

The second project, with IKEA, presented a very different challenge. After the initial meetings, our main contact person suddenly stopped responding, leaving us in a state of uncertainty. We had no feedback on our milestone submissions and were unsure whether we were on the right track. Despite this, our team remained motivated. We encouraged each other, reviewed each other's work critically, and completed the project to the best of our ability. A month later, we were informed that our project had been accepted and reviewed by the association. Although we had worked without external feedback, we remained focused and driven as a team. This experience made me realise that trust, internal motivation, and strong group dynamics are just as important as external guidance.

Through these projects, I not only applied what I had learned in university, but also enhanced my teamwork, leadership, and conflict resolution skills. More importantly, I formed meaningful relationships with peers who shared a similar passion for creativity and innovation. These experiences reaffirmed my desire to work in international teams in the future, ideally in a multicultural professional environment abroad.

Looking back, I can confidently say that the experiences of the past year have reshaped both how I see myself and how I envision my future. I have become more independent, open-minded, and confident in my ability to navigate unfamiliar environments. I have learned to appreciate cultural differences while also recognising the values that connect

us all. Most significantly, I've realised that I genuinely thrive in international environments. Before my exchange, I saw travel as something exciting and enriching, but I didn't necessarily imagine myself living or working abroad long term. Now, I know that this is something I actively want. I would be happy to continue my studies in English, or to work in a diverse, multilingual setting. Being exposed to different perspectives challenges me to grow, and I feel more myself in such spaces.

I've also developed a deeper love for languages. Although mastering multiple languages is challenging, I now understand how vital language is for connection and collaboration. Whether it is English, German, or perhaps another language I have yet to begin learning, I am motivated to keep improving and expanding my linguistic abilities. I've seen firsthand how language breaks barriers and creates a sense of inclusion that goes far beyond words.

Moreover, I've come to value the power of being outside my comfort zone. I believe that being in unfamiliar, sometimes even difficult environments is far more challenging than staying in what is known and predictable. Especially at this age, while I am still exploring who I am, it feels like the perfect time to embrace that discomfort. In such situations, you are accountable only to yourself and cannot rely on familiar routines or surroundings. This constant push out of comfort gives space for the greatest personal growth. I've come to seek out such challenges, as I believe they hold the strongest potential for self-discovery and development.

Participating in the Erasmus+ exchange and the INDUSAC projects has been a turning point in my life. These experiences have not only broadened my cultural and academic horizons, but also strengthened my sense of identity, purpose, and direction. I now approach new challenges with curiosity instead of fear, and I see intercultural communication not just as a skill, but as a way of living, learning, and connecting. As I look ahead, I am determined to remain engaged in international environments, whether through further studies or professional opportunities. What once felt like a distant and uncertain idea has now become a natural next step - supported by experience, personal growth, and a strong belief in the value of intercultural collaboration. I do not know exactly where my next destination will be, but I am certain that wherever I go, I will carry these experiences with me, using them as a foundation for everything that comes next.