



UNIVERSITY OF
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EUTOPIA CERTIFICATE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION (EUCI)

Reflective portfolio

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Cover Letter

My exchange semester at Keio University in Tokyo, Japan (September 2024–February 2025), was a transformative experience that shaped me both academically and personally. As a student of European Studies and Human Rights, I was eager to expand my understanding of legal frameworks, international relations, and cultural dynamics beyond Europe. This portfolio reflects on my international experiences, particularly my semester in Tokyo, but also my earlier semester in Strasbourg, France, and my work as a tutor at Keio Yokohama Elementary School. These experiences allowed me to develop both reflective skills and intercultural competence, which are the learning outcomes of the EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation.

Through this portfolio, I aim to explore how these experiences challenged my assumptions, expanded my perspectives, and deepened my understanding of cultural differences. I will describe academic, social, and daily life experiences, reflecting on how they contributed to my personal growth and intercultural awareness. The reflections herein demonstrate how living and studying in different cultural contexts shaped my identity, enhanced my adaptability, and strengthened my ability to engage meaningfully across cultures. In Tokyo, I encountered educational systems, social norms, and professional practices that were unfamiliar yet intellectually stimulating. Adapting to these contexts required not only academic adjustment but also practical problem-solving and interpersonal sensitivity. Interacting with peers from diverse national and cultural backgrounds further exposed me to different perspectives on law, governance, and society, encouraging me to question my assumptions and approach challenges with empathy.

Working as a tutor at Keio Yokohama Elementary School provided a unique intercultural experience. Supporting children in English within a Japanese educational setting taught me patience, cultural sensitivity, and the importance of clear communication. It also showed me how cultural norms shape learning and behavior, prompting reflection on my own assumptions about teaching, authority, and collaboration. Guiding students while navigating language barriers strengthened my ability to adapt in real-time, understand diverse needs, and engage constructively in cross-cultural settings.

Similarly, my semester in Strasbourg offered a more familiar cultural environment but still provided valuable insights into the diversity within European contexts and the importance of nuanced intercultural understanding. These experiences collectively fostered a mindset of curiosity, openness, and reflection. By critically examining my responses to new environments and considering alternative viewpoints, I have developed skills that extend beyond the academic sphere into everyday interactions and professional collaborations. This portfolio, therefore, not only documents my international experiences but also demonstrates my commitment to ongoing learning, cultural sensitivity, and the capacity to engage constructively across differences.

Reflective Essay

Academic Reflection and Challenged Assumptions

My time in Tokyo pushed me to reconsider many of the assumptions I held as a European student of law and human rights. Courses such as *Introduction to Contemporary China–Japan Relations* and *Introduction to Japanese Law* provided perspectives on governance, history, and societal norms that were far removed from the Eurocentric frameworks I had studied previously. For example, examining Japanese legal culture highlighted how societal values, such as harmony and group consensus, are embedded in the legal system. This contrasted sharply with the more individualistic approach I was accustomed to in Sweden and Europe. Similarly, in courses exploring EU–Japan economic relations, I noticed how international law and trade agreements are interpreted and implemented differently depending on cultural and political contexts. Studying these differences encouraged me to question assumptions about universality in legal norms and to recognize that concepts I had considered self-evident, such as transparency, individual rights, and procedural fairness, can have different meanings in other societies.

These reflections were deepened by comparing my experiences in Tokyo with my earlier semester in Strasbourg. In Strasbourg, I engaged directly with European institutions while living in a city steeped in European history. While the experience was formative, it was also relatively familiar: I could communicate easily in French, and I had relatives nearby. Tokyo, by contrast, required me to navigate a society that was linguistically, culturally, and socially

distant from my own. This contrast allowed me to see how context shapes perception, learning, and behavior.

Identity and Personal Reflection

One of the most profound aspects of my exchange in Tokyo was the opportunity to reflect on my own identity. As a student of Moroccan-Swedish background, I encountered situations that highlighted the fluidity and situational nature of identity. Meeting Moroccan students in Tokyo created an immediate bond through shared traditions, values, and cultural understandings, while my Swedish background allowed me to navigate academic and social settings with relative ease. This dual perspective became especially evident in group discussions and interactions with both Japanese and international peers, where I had to consider multiple viewpoints simultaneously. Living in Japan also encouraged me to confront personal habits and preferences in ways I had not previously experienced. For instance, adapting to local food practices, navigating transportation systems, and managing daily life in a society with different norms required reflection on my own assumptions, privileges, and adaptability.

I became more aware of the subtle ways culture shapes behaviour, from communication styles to decision-making processes, and how these norms can either facilitate or challenge social interactions. Observing and learning from Japanese peers also prompted me to consider the cultural lens through which I view the world, fostering humility and curiosity. Beyond everyday life, I encountered situations that tested my emotional resilience and problem-solving skills. For example, when participating in group projects with Japanese students, I initially struggled with indirect communication and different expectations regarding deadlines and collaboration. This challenged me to develop strategies for effective cross-cultural teamwork, such as actively seeking clarification, balancing assertiveness with respect, and adapting my own communication style. These experiences highlighted how identity is not only about background but also about the skills and attitudes we bring into intercultural interactions.

Moreover, reflecting on Strasbourg and Tokyo together highlighted the evolving nature of my personal growth. Strasbourg offered an introduction to independence and living abroad within a familiar cultural framework, while Tokyo demanded a more complex engagement with difference, ambiguity, and uncertainty. In Tokyo, I also had opportunities to observe and

participate in cultural rituals, festivals, and social norms that were completely unfamiliar to me. Attending events like local school festivals and university ceremonies made me reflect on the values and traditions that inform communal life in Japan, and how such experiences contrast with European social expectations. Engaging in these practices encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone and approach new cultural norms with openness rather than judgment.

The contrast between these experiences made me recognize that identity is not fixed but continually shaped by context, interaction, and self-reflection. By navigating multiple cultural settings and building relationships across differences, I developed a deeper understanding of how context, culture, and personal identity interact in shaping behavior, choices, and perspectives. These insights have strengthened my capacity to empathize, adapt, and engage meaningfully with diverse communities. They also reinforced the importance of self-reflection as an ongoing practice: understanding who I am in relation to others requires continual assessment of my assumptions, reactions, and growth. I now see these skills as central not only to academic pursuits but also to professional environments that demand intercultural competence, collaboration, and ethical engagement.

Daily Life and Cultural Immersion

Beyond academics, everyday experiences in Tokyo provided rich opportunities for reflection. Language barriers were a constant challenge, as English was not widely spoken outside the university setting. Learning basic Japanese phrases, navigating menus, and asking for directions required not only practical problem-solving but also mindfulness and humility. Each interaction was a reflection on how culture shapes communication and how attentiveness to local norms enhances understanding and connection. Engaging with Japanese students, colleagues, and neighbours revealed subtle social codes and expectations. I reflected on the importance of non-verbal communication, the value placed on respect and hierarchy, and how social harmony is prioritised in daily interactions. Recognising these cultural norms allowed me to adjust my own behaviour while maintaining authenticity, a process that required ongoing self-reflection.

Even routine experiences, such as shopping, commuting, or participating in campus events, became opportunities for reflection. I noticed how societal attitudes toward time, personal space, and formality contrasted with my experiences in Europe, prompting me to consider

how cultural values are internalised and expressed in everyday life. These reflections highlighted the need for flexibility and awareness when engaging across cultures, a skill that extends beyond the exchange experience and into professional and academic contexts.

Navigating public transport in Tokyo was one of the most concrete challenges I faced during my exchange. Kasuragi Station, pictured below, exemplifies this struggle. The absence of English signs, multiple tracks, and complex train schedules made it difficult to determine the correct route. Initially, I felt anxious and overwhelmed, but these experiences forced me to develop problem-solving strategies, such as carefully checking maps, asking for help from locals, and observing patterns in train arrivals. Over time, I became more confident in navigating the system independently. This daily-life challenge strengthened my patience, adaptability, and ability to engage with unfamiliar cultural contexts, all of which are key aspects of intercultural competence.

Kasuragi Station: learning to navigate Tokyo's public transport without English signage was a daily challenge that taught me resilience and adaptability.



Intercultural reflection

Interactions and Relationship Building

Intercultural competence was central to my experience in both Strasbourg and Tokyo. In Strasbourg, I navigated life in a city where language skills and cultural familiarity allowed me to engage with local peers and integrate into daily routines. While this provided a degree of comfort, it also revealed the nuances of intercultural communication, as I encountered European students from diverse backgrounds with varying expectations and behaviours. Tokyo presented a more intensive intercultural environment. My classmates came from around the world, including Japan, China, South Korea, the United States, and Europe. Engaging with such a diverse cohort required not only language adaptation but also cultural sensitivity, empathy, and careful observation. Through group work, class discussions, and informal interactions, I learned to navigate differences in communication styles, expectations, and norms. These experiences strengthened my ability to interpret meaning beyond words, appreciate diverse viewpoints, and adjust my behavior without compromising my identity.

Tutoring Experience: Applying Intercultural Skills

Working as a tutor at Keio Yokohama Elementary School was one of the most impactful experiences in developing intercultural competence. Supporting children in English required an understanding of not only linguistic differences but also pedagogical and cultural expectations. Japanese educational culture emphasizes group harmony, patience, and respect for authority, which influenced how children responded to teaching methods and interactions. Reflecting on this experience, I realised that effective intercultural communication is reciprocal: it requires both adaptation and authentic engagement. I had to develop creative methods for explaining concepts, providing encouragement, and responding to diverse learning styles. These skills, empathy, observation, patience, and flexibility are directly relevant to professional and academic contexts where cultural understanding is essential.

Comparative Cultural Insights

Living in two different international settings offered insights into how culture shapes both social and academic life. Strasbourg allowed me to engage with European multiculturalism and institutions firsthand, reinforcing the relationship between language, culture, and

governance. Tokyo, in contrast, demanded more conscious engagement with difference, as cultural cues were less familiar and often implicit.

Through these experiences, I reflected on several intercultural lessons:

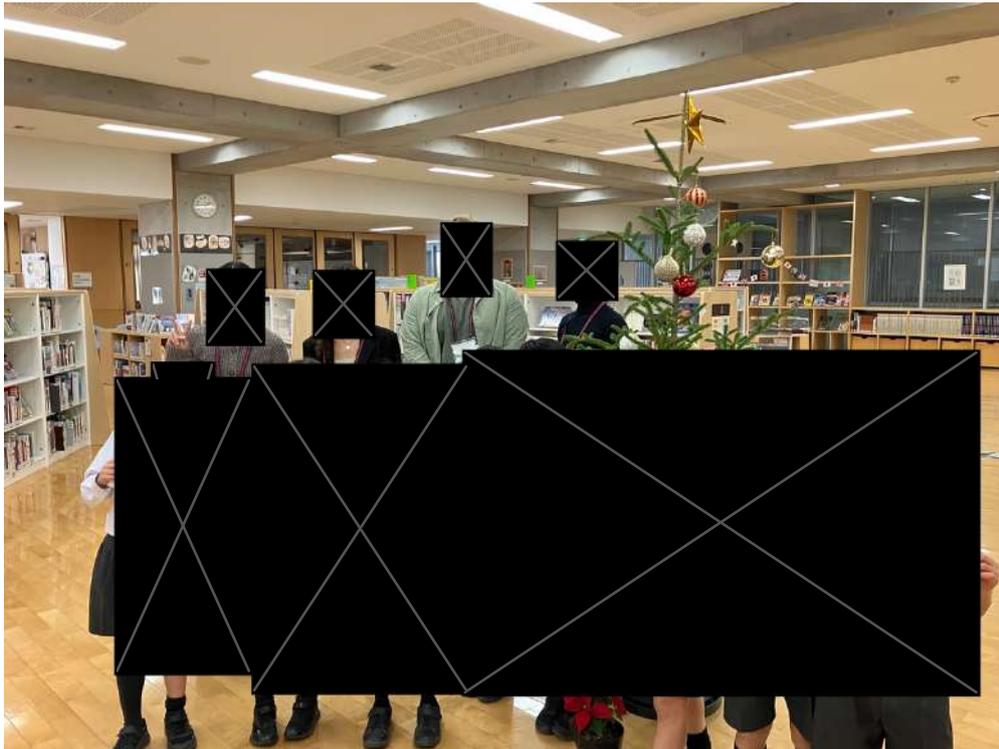
- **Empathy:** Understanding perspectives shaped by cultural and historical contexts.
- **Humility:** Accepting the limits of my knowledge and perspective.
- **Openness:** Willingness to try new practices, learn language basics, and adapt to local norms.
- **Observation and Listening:** Recognizing that meaningful intercultural engagement often requires attentive listening and careful observation rather than immediate action.

These reflections highlight how intercultural competence develops gradually through repeated exposure, active engagement, and conscious reflection on both similarities and differences.

Pictures: Tutoring at Keio Yokohama Elementary School



Working with fellow students and colleagues from the same University (Keio University)



Conclusion: Linking Experiences and Growth

My experiences in Strasbourg and Tokyo illustrate the depth of learning that occurs through international engagement. Strasbourg provided a relatively familiar context for developing independence and intercultural awareness within Europe. Tokyo, however, challenged me to confront differences, adapt to unfamiliar systems, and engage deeply with diverse cultural perspectives. Through academic studies, daily life, and tutoring experiences, I developed **reflective skills**, questioning assumptions, and considering multiple perspectives. Simultaneously, I cultivated **intercultural competence**, learning to navigate language barriers, understand cultural norms, and engage with diverse identities. These experiences enhanced my awareness of global interconnectedness, personal identity, and the importance of empathy and adaptability.

Ultimately, this portfolio demonstrates how international experiences contribute to personal growth and intercultural awareness. The reflections will guide my future academic and professional endeavours or whatever I do, particularly in human rights and international law, where the ability to reflect critically and engage effectively across cultures is essential. By embracing difference, questioning assumptions, and engaging thoughtfully, I am better

equipped to contribute meaningfully to global conversations and collaborations. I am also very thankful for the opportunity to have been able to do these exchanges. It is truly a privilege, like my teacher at Keio University said: “To travel is a privilege; only a small percentage of the world’s population have flown or explored beyond their hometowns”.