

# EUTOPIA CERTIFICATE OF INTERNATIONALISATION (EUCI)

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REFLECTIVE PORTFOLIO

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## Growing Up in Morocco



Growing up in Morocco meant living every day surrounded by different cultures. At home, or out in public, Arabic and French flowed easily in the same conversation, and sometimes even English found its way in without us thinking about it at all. Our celebrations featured elements from a variety of regional traditions mixed together, so it never felt like any particular event belonged to any particular place.

Another influence on me was that I had family who lived abroad. Whenever one of them visit, they would bring pieces of their country with them such as stories about their everyday lives. As a young child I didn't know just how much this was broadening my mind; I just knew it made me curious about places I'd never been to.

This multicultural setting has shaped how I listened and communicated. I learned to draw on a multitude of perspectives without even realizing it. In University, I had many classmates with different backgrounds. This was not strange to me. In Morocco, diversity is not uncommon, it is part of our daily life.

As a result, I became open to meeting new people and learning from them. I came to realize that I learned how to shift the way I spoke or described things by context of the person I was communicating with. I believe this is one of the reasons I adapted so quickly during my

exchange experience in Sweden. This adaptability is one of the key intercultural competencies I developed, enabling me to work effectively with peers from different countries during my exchange and to complete collaborative assignments and group projects without misunderstandings despite cultural differences.

Taking part in the EUCI seminars also gave me a different perspective. These sessions were more than just academic discussions; they were spaces where students from different countries came together to share their experiences of living, studying, and adapting in a place far from home. Hearing about their first impressions, the cultural shocks they faced, and the ways they overcame challenges reminded me of my own journey. I often found myself reflecting on how these exchanges whether in a formal seminar room or over casual conversations helped me understand that no two intercultural experiences are the same, yet we all go through similar emotions when we step into the unknown.

Having grown up in Morocco has also given me the sense of belonging to more than one culture. From eating couscous on Fridays with my family to celebrating international days at university, I was always experiencing mixed influences. I learned that intercultural learning does not only occur abroad, sometimes it occurs in our own home, in our normal routine.

Looking back at my life today, I can now appreciate how growing up in Morocco helped to prepare me for my experience later in life. It provided me with the freedom to adapt, the curiosity to explore, and the patience to understand other people before having a final judgement. These were the ways I made the most out of my experience in Sweden, along with these qualities I know I will continue developing for the rest of my life.

## **Exchange Semester in Gothenburg, Sweden**

When I first chose my exchange destinations, Sweden was nowhere on my list. I had picked places close to Morocco, such as Spain, Portugal, and a few universities in Germany. My final allocation was Lisbon, and I was genuinely happy with that email received. Around the same time, my best friend was preparing to go to Gothenburg for the fall semester. It was her first time in Sweden, and she would often describe how peaceful the city was, despite arriving during the dark, cold months. Listening to her stories made me reconsider my plans. Spain and Portugal would always be accessible to me, but a Nordic country far from everything familiar felt like a true challenge. I knew little about Swedish life, the people, or the language. It would also be my first time living alone, in a place where my parents could not visit due to the long distance compared to Lisbon. That was exactly the kind of leap I wanted to take.

I arrived in Gothenburg in January at 5 p.m., greeted by the early winter darkness. My best friend, who was about to finish her semester, met me at the tram station. Seeing her after so long was comforting, and during that week she guided me through the many differences between the Swedish and Moroccan systems. When she left, I found myself alone in a new city, aware that it was now my turn to create a life for myself. That moment marked the real beginning of my exchange, the point where I committed to discovering what I could do entirely on my own.

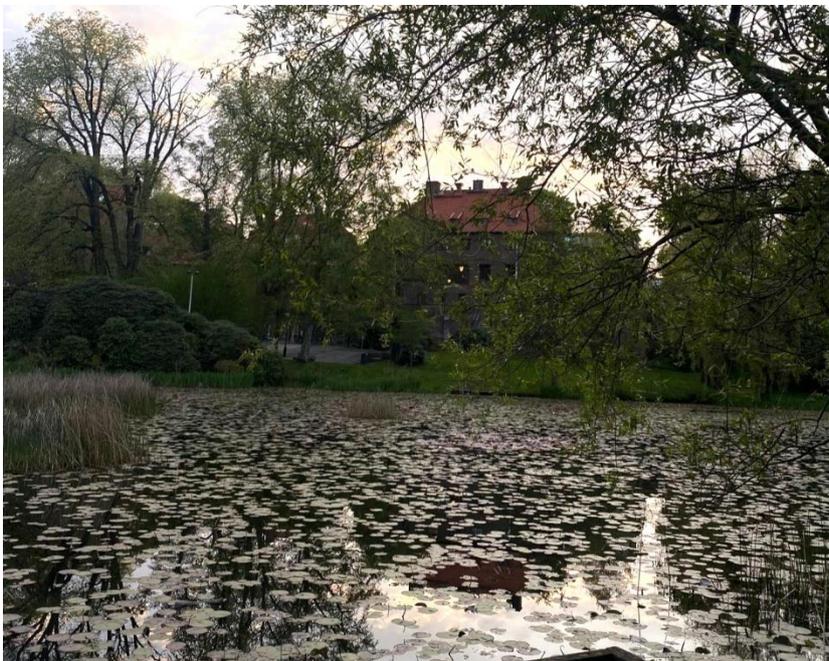
Where I lived was a big student housing complex that had a café and an arcade room that opened twice a week. That space ended up being where I met most of my friends. At first, I just went out of curiosity, but the weekly interactions —playing games, chatting over coffee — slowly helped us build real friendships. Those moments showed me how small, regular encounters can turn strangers into people you genuinely care about.



At first, one of the most surprising things was how much I enjoyed the weather. People were often confused when I said I liked the cold and darkness. Coming from a country where the sun is constant, I found the contrast refreshing. Over time, I began to appreciate the quiet rhythm of winter, especially the walks home under soft streetlights.



Spring and summer in Sweden felt like stepping into a fairytale. Everything was blooming, the weather was fresh and pleasant, despite that the weather was changing frequently to rains. I loved visiting the botanical gardens and joining in on Swedish spring celebrations that truly touched my heart. One tradition I was looking forward to was the Swedish Midsummer. Unfortunately, I had to return home before it happened, but it is now one of the celebrations I am determined to experience in the future.



Socially, I met more people than I could have imagined. My friendships spanned many cultures, and although it is often said that making friends with Swedes can be difficult, I found them to be friendly, kind, and reliable, particularly in group projects. Most of my closest friends were international students, but that diversity was exactly what I valued. One

of my most meaningful connections began with an Italian student who had visited Morocco many times. At our first meeting, she suggested we cook couscous — a Moroccan dish — together for an event, and from that day our friendship grew stronger.



The Swedish system in Sweden was very different from what I was used to in Morocco. Instead of studying several subjects at once, we focused on one at a time, completing the course and exam before moving on to the next. The quality of teaching impressed me, and I grew to appreciate this structure, which allowed for deeper engagement with each subject. At the same time, I was also writing my Bachelor thesis during my exchange, which meant I had to carefully balance classes, research, and social life. Because of this, I initially wasn't planning on taking any trips to other countries. But when my friends invited me to join them for a few days in Oslo, I decided to go — and it turned out to be one of the most memorable experiences of my exchange.



That trip gave me the confidence to try something completely on my own, which is why I later decided to take a solo trip to Copenhagen. Planning everything myself, navigating a new city, and spending time alone there gave me a strong sense of independence.



Hiking also became an unexpected part of my life in Sweden. The surrounding lakes and the islands — like Brännö, which I first visited with friends and later returned to alone — became some of my most cherished places.



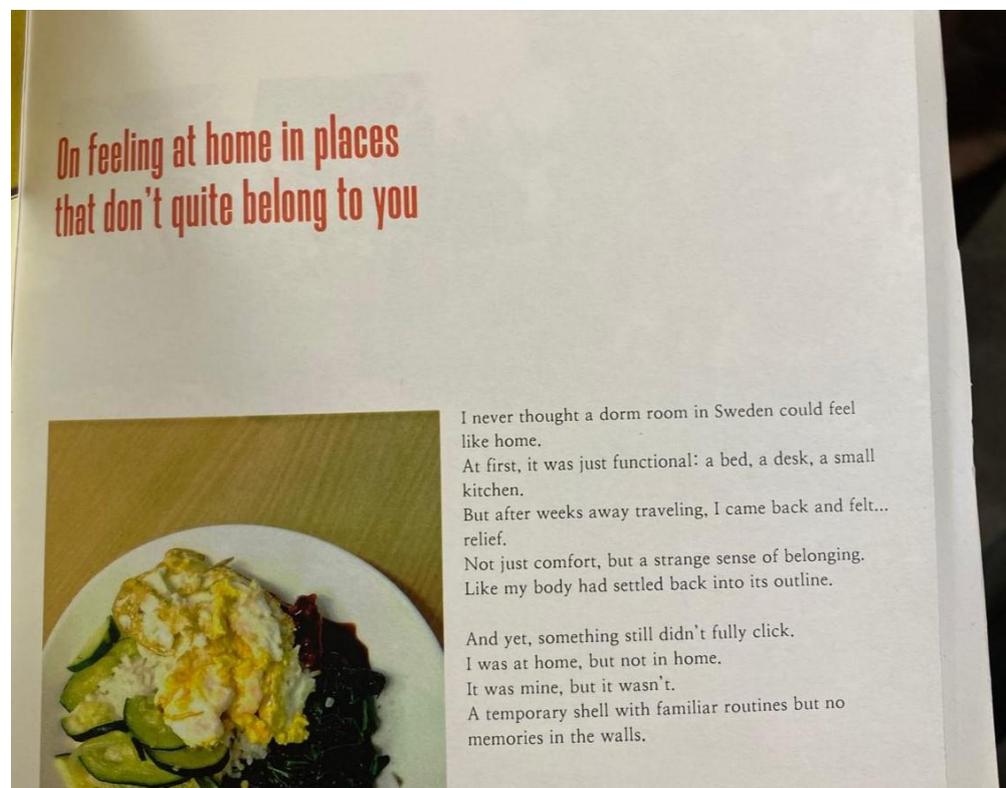
Another thing that stood out to me was the Swedish language. At first, I found it very different from other languages I knew, but my curiosity pushed me to understand certain words I heard around me. Slowly, I started learning it naturally, with the help of friends who spoke Swedish

and taught me phrases. As a Moroccan, I grew up in a multilingual environment, so learning new languages has always been part of who I am. That's why I continued studying Swedish even after I left, I had found a beauty in it that I didn't expect.

Swedish traditions also became part of my daily rhythm, especially "fika", the ritual of pausing over coffee and pastries. The kanelbullar was more than just a sweet treat; it carried a sense of warmth and connection that I will always associate with my time in Sweden.

It has been almost two months since I returned from Gothenburg, yet the experience still feels vivid, as if I had just stepped off the plane yesterday. Coming back to Morocco meant reuniting with family, returning to familiar streets, and slipping back into routines I had known all my life but something in me had shifted. I noticed it in the way I approached conversations, the ease with which I connected with people from different backgrounds, and the quiet confidence I carried when facing new situations.

I often catch myself remembering small details from Sweden — the sound of the tram, the calm of the lakes, the warmth of a fika break shared with friends — and realizing how much those moments shaped me. The friendships I made in the student housing café, during hikes, and on spontaneous trips continue to influence me, even from afar. We still exchange messages, share updates, and plan to meet again, which reminds me that distance doesn't erase genuine connections.



Looking back now, I see Gothenburg as much more than a study destination. It was a place where I challenged myself, learned to navigate life alone, discovered the joy of new traditions, and opened my mind in ways I never anticipated.



Those months abroad didn't just give me stories to tell, they gave me skills, resilience, and perspectives that I will carry into my future studies, career, and personal life. I left Sweden with a fuller understanding of myself, and even though I am home, a part of me will always belong to that chapter of my life. Overall, the exchange resulted in measurable personal growth: improved proficiency in Swedish, expanded professional network across multiple nationalities, and increased resilience when facing unfamiliar challenges.