

Eutopia Certificate of Internationalisation 2025

Reflection Portfolio

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Introduction

My home city is one defined by its multi-culturalism. Birmingham is one of the few places in the UK where less than half the population are White British and has, through most its existence, being a centre of immigration; first from Ireland and India and now from Pakistan and various African nations. I myself can be described as a product of this 'melting-pot', with an unlikely parentage of Irish and Ukrainian immigrants. It is fair to say that aspects of internationalisation have been present with me my whole life as I split my childhood between my family in Roscommon, Ireland, and my family in Birmingham. This theme was to continue when I arrived at Warwick and saw that White British was an even smaller minority than in my home city. When I joined my first group project and found myself sitting awkwardly by myself as everyone else in my group discussed the work in Hindi to each other and gave dismissive looks at my attempts to interlude in English, I knew my time at university would be a delve into the deep end of cross-cultural working.

Now I have come to an end of my time at Warwick I can reflect upon the many great international experiences I have enjoyed and all the lessons I have learned about people - their assumptions, their culture, their way of working together – that allows me to turn the challenges of multiculturalism that I experienced in that first group project into a strength. Looking back I now know that Indian culture is high-context and highly collectivistic meaning that it is normal to have protracted conversations before work to form a shared identity. My attempts to discuss work in English cut this crucial part of their communication out and made me seem not part of their collective. I learned to approach each interaction through the lens of what their unstated cultural rules are and in doing so I have opened the door to understand people in a deeper way.

The two most salient examples of applying this newly tuned skill came from my year abroad at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and my month internship in Suva, Fiji, where I explored a group of cultures I had not previously known about, that being the Melanesians and their interactions with western culture.

Australia

Before my year abroad, Australia conjured up images of vast deserts, scorching heat and venomous jungles. With half the population of the UK but roughly 32 times the size, my expectation of Melbourne was for a relatively small city, much akin to the low-rise urban centres of regional Europe. My amazement was palpable when in the taxi from Melbourne Airport I looked up and saw the skyline dominated by the largest city I had ever seen. There was none of the low-rise quaintness and stone-built avenues laid in time immemorial that defines our European cities. Instead, I saw

cathedrals of glass and steel, standing to attention above their 5.3 million attendees. I was certainly a long way from the green plains of Roscommon.



My first view of Melbourne from the taxi

On a visit to London, I once looked up at the Shard as I walked past, now in Melbourne, rows and rows of skyscrapers looked down at me as they huddled in and walled the grid-patterned streets. It was my first time outside Europe, and I quickly felt that I was in a place where history was new and the marks of millennia of human civilisation were smoothed beneath concrete.



A view of the skyscrapers of Melbourne from St Kilda bridge

Even the people I met seemed to give little indication as to Australia's ancient history. It is a well-known and often repeated fact in Australia that Aboriginals have inhabited the country for at least 65,000 years, but my first months in Australia gave me little indication that they had any presence in the country at all.

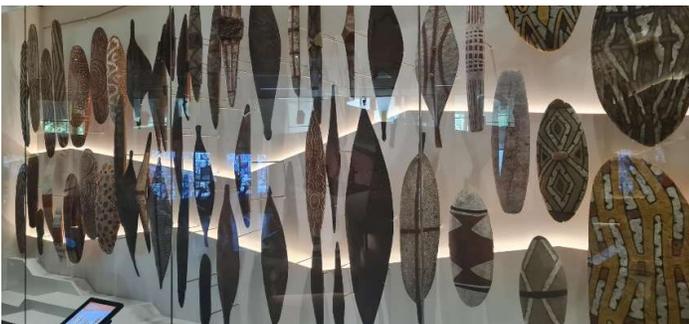
This is mostly due to Melbourne's intense diversity, with Chinese, Indian, Greek and other European communities dominating entire sections of the greater-Melbourne

area. In some places every sign, shop and overheard conversation was in Chinese and I sometimes questioned if I got on the wrong plane and accidentally flew to China instead of Australia. It was difficult not to recall that first group-project where I was very much conscious of my difference from the people around me. It was even more difficult to learn about native cultures when they seemed completely absent.

While Aboriginal Australians were not physically present, it was still impossible not to be conscious of them. This was because every event, lecture and gathering began with the same words: “I wish to acknowledge the people of the Kulin nations on who’s unceded land we are gathered today. I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.”

When I first heard the acknowledgement of country, I thought little of it, but with every repetition and as I interacted more with white Australians, I began to see its significance in showing the seemingly paradoxical relationship between Aboriginals and the western culture of modern Australia. In lectures at Monash I was taught how immigrants have the right to say their new country of residence was ‘their country’ - which is nothing shocking to anyone who receives education in a western country, but the acknowledgment of country reflected an idea that was new and quite unorthodox to me: that natives should be acknowledged and respected as the ‘true’ custodians of the country and foreigners are merely guests. I imagined the outrage that would incur if migrants to Britain had to acknowledge and pay respect to our natives.

This invoked a curiosity in me to learn just how the relationship between Aboriginals and westerners developed to this level. My study took me back to 1848 and a journal written by the explorer Thomas Mitchell who described the Aboriginals as ‘children of nature’. I don’t believe Mitchell intended it as a derogatory term, but the attitude it preceded towards Aboriginals had measured consequences. By contrasting the ‘children of nature’ with the people of industrialised western Europe, Aboriginals were seen as a mere curiosity, similar to a natural feature like a forest. And just as it is seen as benevolent to preserve a forest but nothing bad to demolish it if it gets in the way of progress, Aboriginals were rarely invested in, seen as outside the development plan of Australia and happily brushed aside if they proved to be a hurdle to the growing British population.



The few signs of Aboriginal culture I saw were confined to museums

The 'us versus them' mentality remains to this day in Australia, although the narrative has changed to recognise Aboriginals as the sovereign people of the land and I observed in the youthful and left-wing people of Monash a general contempt towards white Australians, labelling them 'invaders' and 'colonisers' in almost violent displays of emotion seen best during the widespread vandalism on Australia Day – or as I often heard it called, 'Invasion Day'.



Vandalised statues on Australia Day

This led to a question: When the majority of a population is not native to the land, how should integration be managed, if at all? Keeping the people separate and labelling white people as invaders or Aboriginals as 'children of nature' rather than equal citizens of a modern Australia does not seem like a practical approach to create unity. However, if integration is best, should non-natives adopt native culture, or should natives adopt modern western culture? The former would surely meet with outcries of 'cultural appropriation' and be condemned, and the latter would surely be met with outcries of 'cultural genocide' and also be condemned. It seemed an impossible situation for me to solve and I would not be confronted with a similar situation until a year later where an internship took me to another Melanesian nation with a history of managing multiple ethnic groups: Fiji.

Fiji

Unlike Australia, Fiji was exactly as I imagined it to be. Landing at Nadi Airport I saw where the azure sea met the white beaches and how in the distance, jungles rose to cover the jagged peaks of The Sleeping Giant Mountains. From Nadi I travelled the length of Viti Levu, the country's largest island, to the capital city of Suva where I was to work. On my way, there was not a single person who did not wave to my bus with shouts of 'Bula!' – the Fijian welcome, and the streets were lined with stalls of people selling coconuts and mangos under the 30°C winter sun.

Suva is 'working Fiji' – a far cry from the island resorts of the tourist hotspots. The sea was just as blue and the distant hills just as green, but now the waters were full of cargo ships instead of kayaks and to see the distant hills you'd have to look past the office blocks and freight cranes. Yet there was no claustrophobia like in Melbourne; no sense of the buildings walling you in and history being buried under urban development. From the colourful sulus and bula dresses worn on business

days, to the buildings built here of carved stone and there of reeds and palm wood, there was no pretence that Suva was just any other city. The city changed and grew over time, but every phase of this change could be seen: the kava bars selling the ancient drink of Fiji, the century-old cathedral bells calling people to mass and the contemporary businesses where every convenience of modern life was available – like a continuing and uninterrupted legacy as opposed to the miscellaneous metropolitan ambiguity of Melbourne. Wherever I went, I never forgot that I was in Fiji and yet I did not feel that I sorely stuck out like I did in Melbourne. I felt that I was one of a mix of people all welcomed and accepted in Fiji and following this feeling I looked into the ethnic background of the nation.



'Tourist Fiji' vs 'Working Fiji'

Fiji has two main ethnic groups: Fijians and Indo-Fijians who are descendants of Indian workers who came over to work on plantations under British rule. After Australia, I was amazed to see how well the Indo-Fijians were integrated and accepted into Fijian society while maintaining a distinct cultural identity. I knew that there must be a cultural explanation for the successful integration in Fiji that could offer a solution to the problem in Australia.

As part of my internship I spent a day in a village to understand how government policy should be different in providing health to village communities versus the urban population. I sat with the chief of the village and he spoke to me about Fiji's history. One theme came up above all else: pride. He was proud of the ancient tribal culture that was carried forward to the modern day, yet he was also proud of the fact his village had a septic tank, electricity, a school, phone lines and Christianity. There were no cries of cultural appropriation or cultural genocide when something beneficial was adopted or something negative lost, the Fijians I met were simply proud of how they grew and changed with time and the welcoming of Indo-Fijians as simply fellow Fijians was just a part of their culture of having joy in bringing what good they can and taking what good they may.

The enthusiastic welcome I received became all the clearer as I realised that welcoming others was the key to Fiji's progress and the successful integration of its diverse people. Australia failed because they dwell on inequality and differences; Fiji

succeeded because they dwell on what good can come of welcoming others and the pride they have in offering out their own culture.



The welcome I received from all members of the village

Conclusion

Upon my return to the UK I looked upon Birmingham in a different way. I saw the diverse people around me, people who I know are different from me, who are often difficult to work with, and don't see the same things I see. It is all too easy to be annoyed at them, to demand their respect, to expect their recognition as more native to the country as they are. Yet what comes from emphasising division except more division? I wondered what could be created if with pride and welcome I gave myself to others and took them into myself. I believe I can come to not merely work with cultures; tolerating and managing them, but to create a new personal culture that grows, changes and preserves just like the changing city of Suva itself. I can come to take the good I see in others and impart my own upon everyone I meet in confidence that the sharing of who we are is never a bad thing. It took me meeting the people of Fiji to see the merits of pride and welcome, and the division of Australia to see the consequence of shame and scorn.