

## **Ulukhanyiso Bene EUCI 2025 Portfolio: Embracing interculturality within and beyond South African borders**

### **Introduction**

Intercultural competency felt like such a big term the first time I heard it, which was late last year when I was applying to be a Matie Buddy and I had to sit and think about it as well as research. I initially thought it had to do with interacting and performing well in corporate spaces full of people from different cultures because I had associated “competency” with working and a skill. But I came to realise three things. That my understanding of the term was extremely limited, that we practice intercultural competency without even realising it even through something seemingly simple like the story circle we did in the EUCI seminar where we needed to both attentively listen to and learn about others and vice-versa, and that it is an extremely valuable skill to possess in a now highly globalised world and being able to respectfully engage with the next person becomes important. Intercultural competence therefore describes “one’s effective and appropriate engagement with cultural differences” (Arasaratnam, 2016).

There are three major things which have shaped my intercultural competence and worldview. One is coming from a multicultural/multitribal family and from a multicultural place, Soweto – the biggest township in South Africa. The second is being a Matie Buddy in Stellenbosch University, welcoming and supporting international students who come to study here. A Matie Buddy is a Stellenbosch University student who makes and maintains contact with incoming international students. “The Matie Buddy programme is one of the ways in which SU practices internationalisation at home. The aim is to help local students develop intercultural awareness and skills, value diversity, and enhance their global understanding” (Stellenbosch University, 2024). The third thing is participating in TÜ-VIP, which is a 3-month virtual intercultural programme offered by the University of Tübingen every year. The programme offers language courses and other courses that promote critical thinking.

### **My multicultural roots**

My family is a microcosm of South Africa’s linguistic and cultural diversity, like we have our own “rainbow nation” at home. That is because I have two sets of parents and all of them speak different languages with my mom being Xhosa and mainly speaking IsiXhosa and IsiZulu, my stepfather being Zulu and speaking everything from IsiZulu to SeTswana and his extended

family speaks Afrikaans and SeTswana, my dad is Venda and speaks 11 of the 13 official South African languages because he is so well travelled and interacts with people from all backgrounds, and my stepmom is Venda and speaks TshiVenda and English. Living with my mom and stepdad in Soweto has taught me 8 of the official languages and I have interacted with people from all walks of life because of how much Ubuntu (coexisting well with others and helping a neighbour in need, a strong sense of community, to an extent that every elder is your parent – this also goes hand-in-hand with the concept that it takes a village to raise a child) is embedded into the community we grew up in (Thompson, 2025). My siblings and I have therefore been raised with intercultural competency, even without realising it. There are values that have shaped my perspective and expectations of others such as greeting the next person, especially an elder, as a sign of politeness/respect, and that not doing so reflects poorly on your manners and character. Coming from an interconnected society has also built characters that are caring, welcoming and open to embracing the next person and their culture.

### **Language as a classroom**

Building onto embracing the next person and learning about their culture, language has proven to be one of the best teachers. Learning the next person's language has been proven to show an effort to communicate with them better, and once you communicate better, you also get to learn other things like cultural cues and nuances and this has been my exact experience. As part of TÜ-VIP, I enrolled in German language courses A1.1 and A1.2.

Learning German was both challenging and rewarding. It helped me appreciate the effort it takes to learn a new language and the vulnerability that comes with it as you need to be comfortable with making mistakes as you learn. I went in thinking it would be easy because of the assumption of it being similar to Afrikaans and my final A1.2 test humbled me (took it as character development). Looking back, had I not approached learning the language with the assumption, I could have performed better in the course as I would have been coming on a clean slate and eager to learn. The disappointment of not getting the grade I was aiming for was bittersweet in that it showed me that you can't master everything but also allowed me to appreciate taking that bold step. This is a mindset I have since applied to most things in life. But looking back, learning German not only allowed me to communicate with my buddy in 2023, but helped me understand my friends and Matie Buddies from Germany this year, as well as

understand cultural nuances such as the use of “sie” when addressing a senior or stranger and “du” when addressing a friend. On top of that, it has prepared me for professional settings and interacting with speakers of the language when I travel for leisure and studies.

Likewise, my friends and Matie Buddies have learnt IsiXhosa, some to a conversational level both in university and have learnt from our friend group. One of our friends loves and holds the word “chomi” so dearly to the point that she got it as a tattoo before flying back to Germany. “Chomi” is how we refer to each other as friends and that is how we have saved each other’s phone numbers. And they also understand that it is not a word you would use outside the context of friendship and familiarity, similar to how a braai (barbeque) is associated with pap, chakalaka, a variety of meat on the grill, good music, and conversations around the fire. We have come to learn that language is not just spoken words, but is linked to culture and people’s way of life. Language learning became a bridge not just between my buddies and I, but between our cultures. It opened up new ways of thinking, new expressions and new perspectives. It also reinforced curiosity in intercultural interactions.





**My Chommies and I at the beach for the first time**

### **Virtual exchange with the University of Tübingen: A virtual tour**

My 2023 TÜ-VIP buddy was so friendly and my virtual tour guide showing me around Tübingen. We met regularly online, and he generously shared insights into student and regular life in Tübingen, and German customs. I got to see what the nature looks like there and funny enough, it looked a bit similar to some mountainous areas here in the Western Cape like Stellenbosch. I also got to virtually experience the Christmas market that they have every year. Because of this intercultural exchange, Tübingen and Germany in general, have become travel and potential post-graduate destinations for me.

This experience gave me such a positive view of Germany and the people there because of how welcoming and involved my buddy was. Social media had not shown me this friendly and welcoming side and had led to me being apprehensive about travelling there for personal or professional purposes, so the exchange programme was refreshing. I would love to see in person

what I experienced through pictures, emails and endless Zoom calls. And this perception I had got reinforced this year when I met my Matie Buddies who ended up being my chommies (friends) till this day. It served as a reminder that there really are good people out there and that striking a conversation with someone can teach you so much about them as an individual and the culture they identify with. It changed a bit of the perceptions we grew up with that people overseas would not be as welcoming or accommodating, nor willing to learn. It served as a vessel of intercultural competency.

Something my buddy from 2023 found intriguing was box braids and how hair and styling carries so much meaning as well as serving as a protective style, especially after finding out that I braid it myself. He fired away with questions from how long it takes and how it is done and the reasons behind styling the braids, especially putting decorative beads. I would then send him GIFS showing the process of braiding. These conversations sparked an appreciation for the similarities between our cultures. Both South Africans and Germans place a high value on family and education. We shared stories about our families, academic journeys, hobbies and career prospects. These shared values created a strong sense of connection and mutual respect, despite our different backgrounds.



**Christmas Market in Tübingen sent by my buddy in 2023**



Nature in Tübingen sent by my buddy in 2023

## **Food and Buddies**

Food has played a central role in my interactions as a Matie Buddy. Many of the international students have been so eager to explore South Africa and traditional food has been a common point of interest, often visiting Kayamandi which is a vibrant township in Stellenbosch, to experience local cuisines and First Thursdays. These outings were not just meals, but cultural immersions.

Our friends got to learn about how braais work, and we taught them how to cook pap and chakalaka. What was funny was them being more willing than me to cook pap. Through food, from koeksisters to wors, we were able to teach them about the diversity of South African cultures. It was lovely to see the interest beyond the food but the ceremonies and gatherings at which one would find certain foods, such as a wedding in the Xhosa culture. One can expect to find basically every part of an animal from the head (inhloko) to the hoofs and pap. Along with that comes singing and dancing from the beginning to the end of a traditional wedding, as well as Lobola (dowry).

However, in the process, we got to respect that some of them do not eat meat and as an alternative to braai meat, we got vegan sausages. This taught us adaptability and accommodating the next person as we still had other elements of a braai while incorporating and respecting their preferences. This taught me intercultural competency also involves accommodating the next person and finding middle ground as not everything will go the way you want or expect and respectfully navigating such situations and differences is important. Openness means being willing to step outside of your comfort zone, to try new things, and to see the world through someone else's eyes.

One of the cultural differences that gave us all a laugh but was impactful during one of our friends' birthday picnics was the concept of time. In South Africa, "African time", a less punctual approach, seems so common where saying, "I'll be there now now" can mean anything from 5 minutes to an hour. My European friends, on the other hand, are often very punctual and value precise meeting times, in fact, early is on time and on time is late, according to them. This difference led to a couple of misunderstandings in the beginning but taught us the value of time management and the importance of being considerate of others' expectations. The situation showed me that being "5 minutes away" was not respectful to the person with whom the

appointment has been set and that it was a bad habit that spreads to other things in life and made me reflect on and change how I have been treating appointments and prioritising my schedule until this point. This links to the aspect of respect in intercultural competency.

## **Conclusion**

All these intercultural experiences – a multicultural family, a virtual exchange programme and being a Matie Buddy – have had a profound impact on my personal growth. They have made me more empathetic, adaptable, and more confident in my ability to connect with people from different backgrounds. They have done away with preconceived notions social media has shown me about other places and their people and have made me eager to educate myself and interact with people meaningfully. They have also deepened my appreciation for my own for my own culture and the values that have shaped me. I have learnt that intercultural competence is not just about knowing facts about other cultures but that it is about developing the skills and attitudes that allow you to engage respectfully and meaningfully across cultural boundaries. It is about being willing to learn, to unlearn, and to grow. I look forward to growing my intercultural competence in social and professional settings in the future and keep building bridges between the many beautiful cultures across the globe. Intercultural competence is a necessity in an increasingly interconnected world, and it can start with learning a new language or striking a conversation with the person sitting next to you.

## References

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