

Technical University Dresden
Faculty of Business and Economics



Reflective Paper for the EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalization

summer term 2025

submitted by: Viktoria Heibel, 5029754, BA Business and Economics,
7th semester, viktoriamheibel@mailbox.tu-dresden.de

date of first submission: 10. 07. 2025

For as long as I can remember, I longed to see the world. I distinctly remember being a little kid sitting in front of a geography book, trying to copy all the world's flags into my little notebook. The urge to see all kinds of different places was encouraged and made possible by my parents. I cannot remember a year when we did not go on vacation abroad and immerse ourselves in another culture. In middle school, I often toyed around with the idea of doing an exchange program, but a suitable opportunity never presented itself, or rather, I did not really look. While I wanted to discover new places, I was also a very shy and introverted teenager who told everyone how much I liked to travel but secretly dreaded doing it on my own.

In high school, everyone eventually started talking about future career plans. All I could think about was doing a gap year. Somehow, I finally felt brave enough to do it on my own. I was still scared, but the urge to go far away was stronger. I spent my last year of high school excitedly planning until the pandemic hit and put my plans on hold. I enrolled at university thinking I could still go abroad sometime, but for the foreseeable future, it was barely possible to be on campus and have classes. By the time the pandemic was declared over, I had already been well into my third semester. I immediately started looking into opportunities again and wrote applications to participate in an Erasmus exchange. Finally, my acceptance into the Faculty of Business, Economics and Tourism at the University of Alcalá de Henares could not have come at a better time. I felt truly ready and was overjoyed that I would get to spend roughly ten months (from 5th September 2023 to 30th June 2024) in a small city just 40 train minutes away from Madrid.

Reflecting on my time abroad now, almost two years after taking a one-way plane to Madrid, I can say that the experience was nothing but enriching. Through the incredible Erasmus Student Network (ESN) in Alcalá, I formed international connections and long-lasting friendships with people from all over the world. As a group, for instance, we visited Toledo, Seville, El Escorial, and Aranjuez, went sightseeing in Madrid, browsed through the city's famous flea market, El Rastro, saw the Christmas light switch-on, and did so many more things. I got to spend Semana Santa, the holy week before Easter, in Granada with my friends, where we got a true taste of the rich Spanish culture surrounding the holiday. Once classes were over in late spring, we did another trip, this time we flew to Tenerife. The incredible memories I made with those girls will be cherished forever.

I also travelled solo. I took day trips by train to Ávila, Segovia, Zaragoza and

Salamanca, and I spent a few nights alone in Málaga. The more places I visited, the braver I became. Whenever I returned from a trip, I immediately started planning my next one. In March, I flew to Morocco on a whim, where I spent a week in a hostel. It was my first time on the African continent, and the experiences I had there were breathtaking. While I was there, I also met a German girl who now lives in Barcelona. I later visited her, and we travelled to Valencia together. We're still good friends and are planning to meet up again soon.

It is important to point out that living in Spain was not always the fairytale I made it sound to be so far. There have been obstacles, but I'm glad to say I overcame all of them and gained valuable experience and life-lessons that shaped me as a person.

Firstly, moving to Alcalá also meant stepping out of my comfort zone. As I mentioned before, I was very enthusiastic about the opportunity to spend ten months in Spain, but that didn't mean that I wasn't still worried. Although I had previously moved away from my hometown in Thuringia to attend university in Saxony, the neighbouring federal state, I had chosen the same city as my best friend. So, even though I found it difficult to connect with new people, she was always there for me. When I moved to Spain, I was alone for the first time. I had to make an effort to meet people. Being rather introverted, I did not like the idea of going to ESN events alone. But I wanted to meet people, and I knew that this was the time and place to do so. I remember feeling nervous and maybe even a bit frightened before my first events, but I quickly realized that, as it so often turns out to be, the fear was only in my head. Everyone was extremely nice, open-minded, and in the same position as me: alone abroad and eager to make new friends. ESN allowed me to meet people not only with various cultural backgrounds, but also with different academic backgrounds. In university at home most of the people I knew also studied the subjects I studied. Now my friends studied languages, law, etc., and talking to them broadened my horizon because they each had their own perspective on different subjects, taking into account their own cultural experiences and the respective knowledge of their fields. I learned a lot from them. We spent hours discussing the customs and traditions of our home countries, preparing international dinners, or having fun translating typical sayings and combining them in different languages. When we went to clubs together, music brought us all together. We would stand together, screaming along to English pop songs and Spanish reggaeton.

Secondly, the Spanish language did not come and still does not come as easily for me as learning English did. When I arrived in Alcalá, my Spanish was between A1 and A2 level; I had learnt most of it in an online course. I realized that even though I had been learning Spanish for a year at this point and had basic reading and listening skills, I had never actually interacted with another person. When talking with newfound friends, that wasn't a big deal. Since none of us were native Spanish speakers and all had a better knowledge of English than Spanish, we talked in English all the time. I also lived in a multicultural apartment, sharing with five (1st semester), respectively six (2nd semester) people from all over the world, including the UK, Croatia, and Equatorial Guinea. There, we also communicated in English. The same could not be said about day-to-day life in Spain. In this regard, living in Alcalá was like jumping into ice-cold water. For the first time in my life, I felt a bit alienated when I left my flat on a regular weekday. I did not understand what people talked about on the street, I couldn't answer questions, even if I understood what they wanted, I simply lacked the words to reply instantly. I was forced to speak Spanish in the supermarket, in the pharmacy, and in university in my Spanish classes, but also in courses where the syllabus said that they would be bilingual, and slowly but surely, I got better. In hindsight, I'm glad for this because it enhanced my Spanish skills more than every course I took and every book I studied.

Upon reflection, I wish I had tried to interact more with Spanish-speaking people. While I did speak Spanish when necessary, I never really used it in my free time to chat to people. At university, I mostly took English courses, which were mostly attended by other Erasmus students. The Spanish classes were, of course, full of Spaniards, but I was too shy to join a group of native speakers most of the time.

Adjusting to life in Spain went far beyond just learning the language. I found myself constantly surprised by small but meaningful cultural differences. The daily rhythm was the first shock: dinner at 10 p.m., siestas, and the underground in Madrid closing at midnight felt unfamiliar at first but gradually became part of my routine. I also came to appreciate unique traditions like Semana Santa or eating twelve grapes on New Year's Eve, which are things I never would have experienced at home.

Academically, the experience was eye-opening. In the courses I chose, there was a strong focus on EU and international politics and economics, areas that are unfortunately underrepresented in the curriculum of my home university. While mandatory attendance and frequent assessments took getting used to, they also kept

me more engaged. Of course, I missed certain comforts, such as German drugstores and pretzels. But most of all, I missed the German punctuality. Beforehand, I did not think that this would bother me, especially in a private social context. What I failed to take into consideration was the punctuality issue in an academic or professional context. When I had meetings with my supervisor, she never showed up on time. Sometimes I waited for 15-30 minutes, sometimes for over an hour. The issue also persisted with restaurants or shops. Especially for local businesses, there was no telling when they would be open. As I mentioned before, they all did a siesta in the afternoon to open up again in the evening. Of course, one can look up the exact opening hours, but that is really no use when the owners themselves see them as a suggestion instead of a fixed schedule. More than once, I left after waiting some time in front of a closed restaurant door because I realized that it could be minutes, but it also could be hours or days before they opened again. As frustrating as these experiences often were for me, there wasn't only a downside. Professors often weren't that strict about submission deadlines so homework or an essay that you handed in late wasn't an issue most of the times. Still, during this time I learned that I love how punctual and reliable the Germans are especially in terms of important appointments.

During my Erasmus, I also learned about the value of failures and setbacks, as well as accepting them as an unavoidable part of life. Before my stay abroad, I had never really failed at anything. I had always been a good student, in school as well as in university. I passed my driving test on my first try, and when I finally dared to submit my application for my Erasmus exchange, I got accepted into the university that was, in fact, my first choice. Then, mid-terms, a concept I had only ever heard about before, came around. For my one course, European Public Policy, I had to write an essay, which I dreaded so much that I procrastinated doing the work until the last possible minute. I did not understand the assignment, and honestly, in the beginning, the significance of the course at all. So I submitted my paper, and I failed. I was devastated. Even though I hadn't written a lot of academic papers up to this point, I always did pretty well. I suddenly felt very self-aware and also kind of embarrassed. I distinctly remembered a professor at my home university talking about how Erasmus students usually returned home with good grades because our German grading system is stricter. And there I was, not even passing the first assignment I handed in. For the first time since arriving in Spain, I doubted my decision. I thought that maybe I wasn't cut out for the international experience. I was scared because I read that failing courses meant paying

back grant money. I even asked my professor if he thinks I should drop out of his class immediately because I thought I would never be able to make it. He reassured me that failing wasn't as bad as I thought, that I could do it. Looking back on the experience, I now realize that I might have learned more in this course than I did in courses I passed with flying colours. I learned from my mistakes, and honestly realized what academic writing is about.

When I found myself on the plane home after ten months, I couldn't quite believe it. Time had flown by, and I had made countless special memories. Looking back and comparing who I was before my stay abroad and who I am now, in terms of personal growth, I can definitely say that the experience made me more self-confident. I've struggled with a lack of self-confidence for as long as I'm aware. I can think of multiple examples of things I avoided in the past simply because I did not think I could, for example, travelling alone or going to a social event by myself and making friends there. Now, I feel much more capable and open to new challenges. I am confident that I want to pursue a master's degree abroad and am always looking for more mobility opportunities offered by Erasmus or similar programs. For example, in about a month, I'll attend the EUTOPIA summer school on "Business and Sustainability: Sustainable Cities – Infrastructure Systems and Collaboration" in Gothenburg, Sweden.

My time abroad convinced me that I want to focus my studies more on international relations and made me care more deeply about international issues in general. In May, I attended my first Model United Nations (MUN), which was an interesting and valuable experience.

In conclusion, I would like to note that my Erasmus stay in Alcalá de Henares was a holistic experience that impacted me in multiple ways. It's not like I am a completely changed being, but I do notice that it changed my life for the better and made me more curious, adventurous, self-confident, as well as open-minded; I look forward to building on that growth in the future.