

Reflection Portfolio

Reflection on the Lower Mekong Initiative Young Scientist Exchange Program (2019)

I had the opportunity to participate in the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) Young Scientist Exchange Program held in Laos for four weeks in July 2019. This international program brought together early-career scientists from five Lower Mekong countries which are Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Being selected as a Myanmar delegate to this program was a significant moment in my personal and professional journey. This program not only allowed me to engage with peers from across the region but also gave me a platform to explore the rich cultural diversity of our neighboring countries. Whenever I reflected myself, this experience rooted as a foundation for my growing intercultural competence. It also provided early insights to my later international engagements such as YSEALI Professional Fellowship Program (PFP) in 2023 and current master's degree study in UK as an international student.

Reflective Learning: Personal Development Through Exposure to Regional Diversity

I had been to Thailand before, but I didn't get enough opportunity to learn their culture and traditions. It can be said that before joining this program, I had limited direct engagement with people from other Lower Mekong countries even though we share geographical borders and some regional similarities. During the four weeks in Laos, I lived, learned, and collaborated with fellow participants from a wide range of academic and cultural backgrounds. This immersion opened my eyes to both the similarities we share and the nuances that make each national identity distinct.

One of my most impressive memories is from our shared meals. Although several dishes were made from similar ingredients that are available in my country, the preparation methods, seasoning styles, and eating habits varied significantly. For instance, while eating sticky rice with curry was common across Laos and Thailand, it is quite different from other countries including Myanmar. In Myanmar, sticky rice is eaten as a snack with other ingredients. Their special communal dining setup offered sticky rice with curry is a perspective quite different from what I was used to in Myanmar. I initially felt hesitant participating in trying new thing. But after some time, I came to appreciate the deeper cultural meanings embedded in these rituals such as hospitality, inclusivity, and communal values of farming and agriculture. All Lower Mekong Countries are agricultural countries, but I can learn different perspectives on agriculture and agricultural products during this communal meal culture.

I also became aware of the linguistic proximity between Thai and Lao. Nearly all Laotians able to understand and even speak Thai fluently. This linguistic overlap is not surprising because of their historical ties. But this facilitated mutual understanding even in the absence of formal language training. From this point, I deeply understand how language can act as a bridge to different people, different nations. Conversely, Vietnamese culture and language stood out as distinctively different from the rest. They are with unique social etiquette and verbal expressions. This condition initially created a sense of distance but eventually sparked deeper curiosity and conversations.

Through daily interactions, shared group tasks, and cultural excursions, I found myself navigating unfamiliar spaces. It is not only geographically but also emotionally and socially. I recall moments of miscommunication, especially during group discussions when directness was perceived differently by each cultural group. This often forwarded me to adapt my communication style, reflect on how my words might be interpreted, and make conscious efforts to build rapport. These experiences helped me in building empathy, patience, and cultural sensitivity. These are the qualities that I consider central to my development as a regional and global citizen.

Intercultural Awareness: Understanding the Diversity Within Proximity

What surprised me most was the extent to which regional neighbors could be both similar and different. As a citizen and grew up in Myanmar, one of the Lower Mekong countries, I had assumed a certain level of cultural homogeneity within the Lower Mekong region. However, I learned that shared geography does not associate to shared identity through this program. Each country has its own language, values, traditions, and worldview which are shaped by its history, governance, religion, and societal structures.

For instance, Laos displayed strong Buddhist influences like Myanmar but the social norms around hierarchy, time, and formality were subtly different. Thai participants often shared cultural jokes with Lao participants showing that how humor and language can cross borders. In the meantime, Cambodian participants brought up stories that highlighted their post-conflict recovery and resilience. Vietnamese participants, on the other hand, introduced us to their Confucian-influenced values and more structured societal systems. I appreciated the diversity within Lower Mekong countries and the need to avoid overgeneralization after hearing these perspectives personally.

What made this program truly intercultural was not only the content of our workshops but also the unstructured moments such as the informal chats after sessions, the sightseeing trips, the group hangout sessions. These everyday activities offered the most authentic learning experiences. From these experiences, I could observe and absorb the nuances of each culture beyond what textbooks or formal sessions could offer.

From my experience I observe that the intercultural learning was not passive. It required active engagement, willingness to learn, and self-reflection. There were also discomfort moments such as misunderstanding a cultural gesture or unintentionally breaching a social norm. But each incident became an opportunity for growth. For example, when I once interpreted a colleague's silence as disinterest, I later realized that silence during group conversations was a sign of respect and reflection in their culture. This helped me question my assumptions and reframe my understanding of communication across cultures.

Applying Past Learning to Future Engagements

This early exposure to intercultural dynamics through the LMI program significantly influenced my later fellowship with the YSEALI Professional Fellows Program (2023). YSEALI PFP included participants from all ASEAN countries and Timor-Leste. My previous experience shaped

my approaching in this fellowship program. As I had already experienced intercultural immersion in a smaller regional setting, I entered the YSEALI program with a greater sense of openness, adaptability, and cultural humility. From my past experience, I knew how to initiate conversations across cultural lines, ask respectful questions about cultural practices, and listen with genuine curiosity.

Moreover, I found myself becoming a bridge-builder within the group. I could draw on past experiences to help mediate misunderstandings or encourage cross-cultural bonding. For instance, I facilitated a cultural night event, and I brought attention to the shared food heritage of Southeast Asia. During this event, I highlighted how these dishes evolve in different national contexts. I felt natural and confident for this informal facilitator role because of my foundation from the LMI program.

These cumulative experiences also continue to shape my current journey as an international postgraduate student in the United Kingdom. It is also totally different from previous exchange programs. Living and studying in a multicultural academic environment has offered another dimension of intercultural learning. I regularly engage with peers from diverse national, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. Now the students are from across the world including Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The intercultural competencies I developed through the LMI and YSEALI programs have helped me confidently navigate both in academic collaboration and social interaction. international setting,

In seminar discussions, I can contribute regional perspectives from Southeast Asia. I also appreciate the alternative worldviews presented by my classmates. I consciously apply active listening, inclusive communication, and cultural empathy. These are the skills I first learned during my regional fellowships, and this help me to foster meaningful dialogues and shared learning. These experiences have made me more aware of my own cultural lens, and more capable of working across difference in a respectful and constructive manner. Now I understand that intercultural competence is not just a soft skill. This is one of the critical assets in academic, professional, and global citizenship contexts.

Conclusion: Lifelong Impact and Future Directions

Reflecting on the 2019 Lower Mekong Initiative Young Scientist Exchange Program, I recognize it as a profound turning point in my intercultural development. It was my first structured experience in a multicultural setting that demanded both intellectual engagement and emotional sensitivity. I gained the insights from shared meals and language barriers to moments of cultural misunderstanding. These insights have stayed with me and evolved through subsequent international experiences.

These experienced developing have deepened my commitment to regional cooperation, intercultural communication, and diplomacy. They have also influenced my academic and professional goals in the areas of sustainable development and food security. These areas require

collaboration across borders and is essential for every developmental process. My current master's studies in the UK continue to reinforce this belief. Because I engage in global discussions that require a deep understanding of cultural context, inclusivity, and shared responsibility.

For the future, I intend to continue participating in initiatives that foster intercultural dialogue, inclusive education, and community-driven solutions. I believe that building bridges across cultures is not only vital for personal and academic growth, but also for addressing complex, transboundary challenges that require global cooperation and mutual understanding. Since I have been shaped by intercultural learning as a global citizen, I would like to carry these values into every space I enter that will be academic, professional, and civic.

Reflecting on Intercultural Learning through the EUCI Course

Before joining the EUCI course, I had already engaged in several intercultural and international experiences. I was selected as a participant in the Lower Mekong Initiative Young Scientist Exchange Program (2019) in Laos, and later in the YSEALI Professional Fellows Program (2023) in the United States. These programs immersed me in diverse cultural environments, introduced me to peers from ASEAN and Timor-Leste, and offered first-hand experiences in navigating cultural differences through collaboration, communication, and shared learning. I believed I understood intercultural competence simply by participating in these programs. However, through the EUCI course, I have realized that experience alone does not equal understanding.

The EUCI course provided a structured space to engage more deeply and critically with the concepts of reflection and intercultural learning. It introduced me to theoretical frameworks and methods that allowed me to revisit and re-analyze my past experiences through new lenses. For example, learning about different models helped me better understand the stages of my own intercultural development. The development is starting from initial curiosity and awareness to deeper adaptation and integration. I also learned to see reflection not just as a description of events, but as a process of evaluating, challenging, and transforming my own assumptions.

This shift has been significant. Now I clearly understand. In the past, I sometimes overlooked deeper cultural dimensions and relied on surface-level observations. For example, during the LMI program, I noticed cultural differences in food habits and language among neighboring Southeast Asian countries. But I recognize how those everyday practices reflect larger societal values, historical contexts, and power dynamics after EUCI. The EUCI course helped me to ask better questions, listen more actively, and reflect more meaningfully.

Studying in the United Kingdom as an international student in a master's program has further added to this reflection. I regularly collaborate with classmates from all over the world from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. These interactions challenge me to adapt my communication style, recognize implicit biases, and embrace different academic and cultural perspectives. The EUCI course helped me navigating this diversity with greater awareness, and to understand how intercultural competence, not a fixed skill set an ongoing process is.

Finally, the EUCI course has helped me bridge my past international experiences with a more intentional and reflective intercultural practice. I have learned that internationalization is not just about mobility or diversity. It's about creating inclusive spaces where all voices are heard, understood, and valued. In the future, I intend to apply these insights not only in academic settings but also in professional and community engagement. I will apply these in the areas of sustainable development and food security which are my professional interest. Since intercultural collaboration is key to finding solutions that work across different contexts in these areas.