

Learning About Internationality and Cultural Encounters with a Young Student

7.1.2025

Suomeksi: Oppimassa nuoren kanssa kansainvälisyydestä ja kulttuurien kohtaamisesta

At SeAMK, the International Education Services team occasionally welcomes significant visitors. This time, we had the pleasure of spending a day with a high school student, an excellent example of how experiences of cultural encounters contribute to personal growth – and can even leave a societal impact.

The student defines internationalism as follows:
“It means interacting with people from other cultures. It enhances one’s understanding and maturity. Internationalism is beneficial because it teaches us to see things from new perspectives.”

The student elaborates further:
“For instance, when you notice someone behaving differently than you’re accustomed to, it no longer feels strange or intimidating once you’ve interacted with people from various cultures. Instead, you realise that certain behaviours may be cultural. From my experience, when someone is surprised in a situation where someone speaks loudly, I can explain that, in my family, we always speak this way. At the same time, I’ve observed that even Finns are diverse. I’ve learned to avoid stereotypes because, for example, while Greeks are often considered loud, I know some Greeks who are quite the opposite.”

Greek and Finnish Roots: Building a Resilient Identity

“I have always carried two languages and cultures with me – I’ve always known both. Personally, I’ve learned a lot from my Greek heritage. I understand things my peers don’t know. For example, if a word has Greek origins, I can easily recognise it.”

“Knowing two languages and cultures is enriching, but it also presents challenges: I’m half of both cultures but not fully one or the other. For instance, in Finland, I enjoy Greek things, and vice versa. However, it sometimes feels like I’m too much of one or the other.” This can be seen as a strength, as it helps young people navigate a globally interconnected world while balancing different cultural positions. This is a skill that every level of education seeks to impart to future global citizens. As Professor Eero Ropo explains (Ropo, 2019; see also Davies & Harré, 1990), such competencies are critical.

This dual perspective also enriches academic learning. The student shared that being connected to two histories makes studying them particularly fascinating:
“Greek culture’s perception of time, its traditions, and early civilisations are monumental and grand, while Finnish history derives its significance from closer contexts. I really enjoy Finnish history, especially its military history.”

Moving between cultures and languages fosters a mature mindset and a deeper understanding of the world. The student explains that such experiences raise questions their peers might not otherwise encounter. Having the ability to ask questions enables finding answers, reinforcing one’s sense of self and sparking meaningful discussions with others. This strengthens a sense of belonging (see, e.g., Chiu et al., 2016).

Experiences of Internationalism in Dual-Cultural Landscapes

The high school student, participating in this work experience with us, has attended schools in two countries and has been a foreigner both in Finland and their other home country. These experiences provide valuable insights for our expert work. They also highlight the possibility of implementing pedagogical approaches and decision-making that better account for multilingualism and identities (Cummins, 2013).

“After moving to a new place as a foreigner, I realised what it feels like to adapt to a new environment.”

“I’ve always been in classes with international students, even in primary school. Here in Seinäjoki, I notice international influences in the cityscape, such as in shops, restaurants, and cultural offerings. Shops like Mokka Market, international restaurants, barbershops, and foreign products, including Nepalese and Chinese cuisines, make multiculturalism visible. Supermarket theme weeks also encourage people to try foods from different countries. My international background is also evident in everyday situations, such as recognising Greek names. Occasionally, I meet another Greek person, and it creates an instant connection.”

Internationalism in the Workplace

Our conversation then shifted to the future from the student's perspective, particularly relevant as this was a work experience placement. Engaging with young people is essential to gain a complete understanding of the world they are shaping alongside us adults (see, e.g., Mietola et al., 2021).

"International work environments surely bring diverse perspectives and ideas. Collaborating with people from different backgrounds improves one's ability to understand others, communicate clearly, and be flexible. For instance, if there's an Italian colleague at work, you'll gain insights into their culture that make it entirely different from just visiting Italy on holiday. You can have meaningful conversations and get practical tips."

Given young people's valuable experiences and their ability to connect with their peers, I find it particularly intriguing to consider young people teaching each other about the benefits of internationalism. Perhaps this could make globally networked communities and internationalism more tangible for them.

If every young person could experience diversity as follows:
"A diverse workplace makes people more understanding and open-minded. It also helps them adopt new perspectives," we could undoubtedly promote communal and inclusive well-being in the long term.

Suggestions for Building International Experiences

Exchange programmes like Erasmus are often school-initiated, starting from secondary education. However, the student suggests that information about these programmes should be clearer and more inspiring, as the details are sometimes difficult to interpret, and it's not always clear how to apply for such opportunities. International elements could also be included more strongly into various subjects. For example, history or physics courses could involve physical travel or digital, or storytelling experiences.

"At school, everyone knows which teacher is responsible for [international affairs], but perhaps others could also talk about international topics. Home-based internationalism could be promoted by inviting more visitors to schools or featuring international speakers sharing insights about their cultures. Language teachers occasionally bring in foreign guests, but this could be done more systematically."

It is essential to ensure young people have international experiences even without travelling, as not everyone can participate in exchange programmes. Making these "paths to internationalisation" clearer and more accessible would make a significant difference.

Collaboration Between SeAMK and Schools

During our conversation, we brainstormed potential collaboration ideas – for instance, SeAMK's international students could visit local schools to share their cultures, languages, and histories. This would offer students a

real-life glimpse into internationalism while also giving SeAMK students a closer connection to Finnish culture.

International Learning and Societal Development

Our discussion concluded with societal themes. According to the student, learning from other societies and cultural practices could help improve nations and communities.

“Finnish policymakers could learn from other countries and adopt best practices. Similarly, Southern European countries could improve their systems in many ways. For example, from a Greek perspective, Finland’s approach to GDPR is much more rigorous. The lack of corruption and the public education system in Finland are significant advantages.”

If a high school student can think so insightfully, imagine the possibilities that international experiences could unlock for improving communities of all kinds.

“Global education is about nurturing global citizenship and building a sustainable future” (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2024).

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