

My Biggest Take-Aways From the Norec Youth Exchange 2020.

This exchange has been the most stirring and enlightening journey of my life, and I will forever look back and be humbled and proud of myself for being a part of such an amazing experience. Going out of my home country to do what I love the most is a huge deal. In addition, having a chance to learn, train, and empower youth is one of the most important things I am taking away from this experience. As the first young female ambassador to represent Inkululeko on this exchange, I am looking forward to sharing the skills and knowledge back home, which I believe will be an additional benefit to the growth and vision of Youth Empowerment in the organisation.

Things I'm taking away from the exchange:

Getting Out of My Comfort Zone: Traveling out of my home country for the first time was a big step for me to take, and for me, it meant getting out of my comfort zone. I learned how to be independent and away from my family and loved ones. I learned how to make friends and be strong and focused under my own guidance. Most importantly, I learned the feeling of being a foreigner and I can say, it's challenging, exciting and very eye opening.

Confidence and Independence: Most of my life I've been close to home or around close friends, which is where I felt most comfortable and confident because those people know me and vice versa. The exchange meant leaving all that behind and going into a whole new world with different people, cultures, food, lifestyles and language. This taught me to learn to smile, communicate more, to be kind, and to be confident enough to speak up without the fear of being misunderstood. I found my confidence. Being confident also means being patient enough to tolerate people and trying to understand them while making them understand you. This is especially important because the language barrier is a challenge and not everyone understands English.

Facts About My Country: Most people love their home countries and still love to travel; I am one of them. I love challenging myself and learning new things. Being in the exchange has made me realise the importance of the economy, the role of government incentives, education, the need for empowerment and how the South African government has progressed in meeting a few important basic needs of its citizens. I have also realised the damage, or rather, the scar Xenophobia leaves on people's hearts, and how it makes others fear visiting South Africa even though they love it at heart. Despite the violence and the stereotypes, I've seen that my country is one of the most loved African countries by tourists from all around the world. It has great hospitality, history and landscape. My host country is very religious compared to my home country and the lifestyle is completely different. People in my country of exchange like the same things as the people where I come from do, we just have very different ways of doing them. This makes most of the things they do strange at first, but you adapt.

There Really Is No Place Like Home: The first 3 months of the exchange are usually the honeymoon phase, where you are still trying to find your footing, make friends, learn the place, language, and food. There are usually many challenges in this stage such as bank limits, getting a sim card that works on your phone, adapting to the bank charges, and learning the transportation system. When you are new in a place, smiling is the best thing you can do while being extra careful and kind to make it easier to move around and get familiar with the place. As months went by, I came to understand the basics of the language, became comfortable with the food, and picked my favourite Kenyan dish. The breakout of the Covid-19 Pandemic led me to miss home the most. Being isolated in a foreign country is a devastating experience; it interfered with my program, studies, and experience in the country of exchange. One of the reasons I miss being home is the food, which tastes different here. I also miss the transportation at home. Honestly, when it comes to the currency used in Kenya and the economy, there really is no place like home.



A New Way of Life: The exchange has made me a better person in more ways than expected. I have improved in saving, making better decisions, being considerate, and it has made me appreciate the value of knowledge and education. I have improved in my communication skills and I have enjoyed being out of my comfort zone for a little while, as it helped me find myself and grow individually.

It's the Little Things: It is the little things that you miss the most, that matter the most and sometimes, the opposite of both. In the first few months you start to miss speaking your home language and being immediately understood, going to the shop and getting the food you want, seeing a familiar face, or even visiting your family. You miss the little things about home sometimes, like home cooked meals, because staying at a hostel in a foreign country miles away from home can get very lonely. The nice thing about the exchange is that you get invited to small family gatherings when you start making friends, which makes you feel closer to home. They engage in tasks similar to those back at home and you become this one big happy foreign family.

Making Life-Long Friends In a Few Days/weeks: Making friends is very important in a host country; it makes it easy and possible for you to learn more about the country, the language, the lifestyle, and the place faster, and makes you fit in quicker. This is very important and it challenges your personal growth, your attitude, and sometimes can test your limits. Sometimes making a lot of friends can be a disadvantage, because the exchange is a short space to learn to trust all those friends and keep focused on what you are on the exchange for at the same time.

People Are Kind: People are kind, especially when they receive the same kindness and energy from you, too. Being kind to people helps you experience their kindness in return, gives you courage, confidence, and makes it easier for you to connect with the people around you. A little act of kindness like asking someone how they are doing or teaching them how to say "Hi" in your foreign language and other things you can do to show kindness go a long way. It's like throwing the roots of kindness in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees.

It is very important when you are on the exchange to become friends with your partner (the other participant), get along, and take good care of each other. After the honeymoon stage, and even during the first few months of the exchange, adapting to a host country can be a very tricky and sometimes difficult thing to get used to, especially if this is your first time you are going away from home for a long time.

Benefits of The Exchange:

A chance to learn new skills, facilitate and empower youth to better their lives, and all the knowledge gained through this experience propels me towards acceptance and understanding of an array of different cultural and community perspectives. Being on the exchange enhances your interest in global issues and broadens your general knowledge. Language acquisition, awareness, adoption of alternative, various approaches to learning and analytical and problem-solving skills.

Personally, the exchange experience has been very awakening, self-developing, and enhanced my self-confidence. I have matured; it boosted my social poise and fuelled the necessity to confront challenges without my supportive network and comfort-zone. I integrated into a new family and developed a few life-long relationships. A tremendous sense of accomplishment upon completion encouraged me to develop opinions, make informed decisions and strive to attain fresh goals. Being out of my comfort-zone increased my ability to communicate with others, relate to others, and possess personal sensitivity towards others.

I will take away one important lesson from travelling to a host country for the first time: not to ignore the tedious tasks, like paper work, acquiring copies, and printing out necessary documents e.g. medical notes. It is important to make sure things like bank cards, I.D., and passports are in a safe place. It is important to plan ahead of time when you are going to travel and save yourself the trouble of not being prepared. It is important to budget very carefully, and if possible, save religiously and most importantly, make the most of your experience every chance you get.