

MY TIME AT A LITHUANIAN UNIVERSITY

By Stephanie H Greenaway

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There are moments in life where an opportunity comes your way and you know you must seize it with both hands. At the end of 2018, just after exams, I found myself present with such an opportunity from the Federation University Business School. An opportunity which I simply could not let pass, I had the chance to apply to attend ISM University's intensive three-week summer program in Vilnius Lithuania. Lithuania is a quiet little country, with a population of less than three million people, that is nestled between Poland, Latvia and Belarus in the Baltic belt.

ISM University

ISM University was the first private university to be founded in Lithuania. ISM University of Business and Economics is situated near Old Vilnius, the beautiful heart of Lithuania, and it is here that I spent a wonderful three weeks learning and exploring this beautiful city, surrounded by baroque architecture and history. While Lithuania may be small and the university itself not overly large the breadth of knowledge and passion of the lecturers was profound.

ISM offered four courses over the summer program; however, it is two specific subjects that captured my attention. International Negotiations and International project management.

International negotiations

One of the most important aspects of my time here in Lithuania is the opportunity to learn from an entirely new perspective. This was one of the most enduring and wonderful aspects of my time at ISM. In my International negotiations class I had the privilege to listen to Mr Artūras speak about his time negotiating with the Russians on the border. Soviet occupation is merely a historical fact and curiosity in Australia, something only read about in books and occasionally spoken about by immigrants who endured its challenges. But to hear my lecturer speak about his time negotiating in a diplomatic context, the tactics they used and the Russians used was a fascinating insight into intercultural communication, its similarities and differences, and how significantly it contrasts in comparison to our own.

But it was not just the diplomatic context he would draw on as examples of integrative (win/win) or distributive negotiations (win/lose) but also local industries and European industries such as Maxima (the largest supermarket/hyper art in Lithuania) and Deutsche Bahn.

As part of our course we were required to implement theory into practice through two negotiations in which we were given briefs where we were to role play a negotiation, on the first occasion using a distributive style and

the following time an integrative style, using the brief to come up with our own BATNAs (best alternative to a negotiated agreement), ZOPA (zone of possible agreement) and Reservation price (walk away price) and attempt to negotiate the best possible agreement for our team and then to explain and justify how we measured our reservation prices and our strategies. This was an insightful experience as it was extremely interesting to see how each of the students used their own experiences and understandings of culture to attempt to succeed in the negotiations. The discussions this sparked was amazing and seeing the differences between Australia and Europe, and the individual European countries to each other!, was amazing to see.

While I am no economist I found my teachers perspectives on the uses of the Prisoner dilemma and Social dilemma in negotiations to be facilitating and insightful. The concept of not 'defecting first' and ensuring you don't start the process in which everyone will experience a lose/lose scenario was extremely interesting.

Organisational culture from a Lithuanian perspective.

Effect of personality and culture in negotiations.

Trying to navigate differences.

We were privileged to have a guest speaker come and talk with us about international negotiations in Europe. She spoke a great deal about the legal issues and requirements in regards to the Vienna convention and other laws and regulatory bodies which assist in maintains a set standard throughout the EU. It was also interesting to see how they viewed the UK and Australia's laws in regards to contracts. Contract law in Europe does not follow common law practices like in the UK and Australia.

Consideration is not a requirement, they have legal unilateral contracts which as a strange concept.

Self-awareness and critical thinking are the key to developing good negotiation skills.

International project management

International project management was a fascinating experience. As part of my pre-course work which was to be completed before arriving, we were placed in teams of five and given a topic in which we were to prepare a presentation to be given in our first week. I was partnered with two German students, a Spanish student and a Chinese student for the purposes of my project and only given their names and email addresses with our topic.

Working in a team in which we from different time zones and vastly different cultures was an interesting experience. While many theories and academics discuss the effects and dynamics of international projects and virtual teams having the opportunity to undergo the process was amazing and invaluable. From making first contact, to forming a common communication channel, deciding on task allocation and completing the project each stage brought with it its own challenges. After we completed the project it was an almost surreal experience to meet in person in Vilnius. While we did Skype and maintained frequent communication throughout the pre-course work stage, meeting and speaking together was a wonderful experience.

We continued to work together through the course as well, being given further group assignments and tasks in which we were to collaborate. Navigating cultural and language differences it was a wonderful experience which I feel has now given me a better insight into how I may utilise better communication strategies not only in my future course work at the Federation University but in industry as well.

The Students

One of the more nerve-wracking aspects of my journey was knowing I was possibly one of the few, and as it would happen the only, native English speakers to be attending the summer course in Lithuania. However, this ended by far one of the most valuable experiences I have gained from this exchange. Through this opportunity I was able to meet and converse with students from multiple countries, University degrees and life experiences. Through group work, assignments and casual conversation I learned a great deal about their cultures, the differences in our legal structures (specifically tenancy laws, they were horrified that our real-estate agents conduct 'inspections' while the Tenant is residing in the property, this is illegal throughout the majority of Europe).



Conversing with the other exchange students was an enlightening experience. Many were shocked that exchanges were not common place in our schools and universities, but once they discovered the extremely expensive s long plane journeys they saw why it was a limited option for many, but hearing about their experiences, travelling to different countries, working in different countries through internships and work placements, was fascinating. I had always thought Australians were quite worldly, but in truth we are very insular and isolated from the rest of the world and I fear it is to our detriment that we are not encouraging more students to learn other languages and go abroad for more than just vacations in Bali.

Although it hasn't been all smooth sailing with the other exchange students, nothing in life is ever 100% perfect. We did have issues with some students not really caring a great deal about their studies and seemed to have different ideas about what is considered a reasonable noise level in the am hours. But these were minor and the positives in my

interactions with my fellow exchange students far outweighed any grievances.

Cultural differences

One aspect of my time here in Lithuania was the chance to speak with my fellow peers about the cultural differences within organisation in comparison to Australia. It is in this respect that I have learned a great deal. Many of the German students were surprised not only what we didn't put on our resumes but also what organisations were not allowed to ask. It made them question the fairness of how their organisations underwent recruitment. During my conversations with my German roommate one consideration I had never considered was the cultural differences in regards to first names in business settings. Many German organisations pressure their employees to follow a more western openness approach and to allow unfamiliar people and colleagues from western nations to use their first names. In German language and culture this is a breach of social protocol and makes many, not all but many, Germans uncomfortable and disrespected. I have always tried to be mindful of cultural and language differences and felt quite saddened that in global organisations the western approach is seen as the standard and that they feel they must 'concede' to our values. Perhaps it is time western workers meet in the middle and offer these basic forms of respect to our foreign colleagues and learn these cultural norms rather than just expecting our own to be the default.

Another fascinating learning experience with my fellow students was learning the cultural differences in regard to recruitment and selection. In Germany specifically it is still the norm for your marital status, age, address and photo to be on the applicants resume, with many organisations not giving further considerations to applicants who did not provide this information. My peers were impressed and surprised Australia's progressiveness in this area as they were unaware of the amount of anti-discrimination laws and protections we provide our workers, one of the German exchange students wasn't surprised to hear this however as she informed me that Australia is seen as the Scandinavia

of the western world in regards to our progressiveness which was nice to hear.

Company trips

One of the most memorable experiences I had the pleasure of taking part in was the company visits, offered by ISM University, in which we were given the opportunity to visit the workplaces and interact with the staff, hear the stories of how they began their companies, their vision, missions and recruitment policies. As well as relating the talks back to the subjects we were undertaking, in my case international project management and negotiations. Having the opportunity to listen and ask questions in organisational with not only different national cultures but organisational cultures as well was extremely insightful. Thinking back in the experience I must admit it would be an invaluable addition to my course if a similar opportunity was afforded to our students, to not only learn theory but to see it in action as well as have the opportunity to ask questions and further broaden our understanding of Australian and possibly Asia Pacific business relations.

Pirmas Blynas

As part of our course at ISM University we were given the opportunity to go one two company visits in the first and second week. For the first company visit we were given the option to attend the Western Union Company visit, a Global finance organisation, or Pirmas Blynas¹, a locally owned and operated social project, pancake house run by people with disabilities. While the temptation to see a global financial institution was



¹ Tim Van Wijk, email: info@pirmasblynas.lt No: +370 617 93037 website: <http://www.pirmasblynas.lt/about-us>

very tempting the possibility of seeing an organisation whose vision, mission and hiring practices challenged common perceptions and biases in regards to the disabled community won.



We were given the privilege of meeting the owner Tim Van Wijkⁱ, a Dutch immigrant living in Lithuania, who in September 2018 personally financed and created Pirmas Blynas, as he had noticed that Lithuania had a particularly difficult relationship with the disabled community and often treated them as an ‘out of

mind out of sight’ issue. The pancake house is currently run by Tim and five workers, whom we had the pleasure of meeting and interacting with, each worker took an immense amount of pride and dedication to their roles. During our time at Primas Blynas we listened to Mr Van Wikj speak about his trials in attempting to build value in his idea to financial institutions as well as his workers as employees in the eyes of the community. It was heart-breaking to hear how many of the workers initially only ‘wanted to clean’ not because they enjoyed the role, but sadly, because that is what they had been told they were only good for.

With Mr Van Wikj passion and desire to show them just what they were capable of he encouraged and motivated them to try different roles. Soon their abilities and passions rose to the surface and gone were the timid, apologetic workers who felt the need to apologise for simply being, to bright, charismatic and happy employees who loved talking with the customers and helping to create new pancake ideas for the monthly special.

From a Human Resources and Recruitment perspective it was interesting to hear how Mr Van Wikj wanted to challenge the perceptions of what makes a valuable employee, who is ‘worth’ hiring?

The workers we met were a testament to what is possible when you give people an opportunity, which made the name of the pancake house a

bittersweet. Primas Blynas, the first pancake. We know the first pancake always burns but the next one will be better, and the next one after that better still, the employees were given the chance to work, to shine and decide their own purpose, they are a representation of the symbolic nature of ‘the first pancake’.





Biotek

Our second company trip was to a cosmetics manufacturer called Biotek. A Lithuanian multinational cosmetics manufacturer which began during the final years of the Soviet Union and has now expanded into a well known

natural European brand.

We had the pleasure and privilege of sitting and listening to the company CEO Romualda Stragienė discuss and describe Bioks Company's history and formation, their mission, vision and plans for the future. It was fascinating to hear how resourceful the Lithuanian founders needed to be during the final years of the Soviet Union to Acquire the materials and information needed to develop their products, this was a difficult and dangerous process under the iron fist of Soviet rule, and how after the official fall of the iron curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet empire in 1991 industries in Eastern Europe boomed and expanded at an exponential rate.

Lithuania is seeing a boom in industry at the moment and it was interesting to hear what their plans for the future in regards to expansion and their view of globalisation and the positive effect it could have in their small company, by global stands. The company trips is something I believe we should integrate into the business school curriculum. I learnt so much from being given the opportunity to see how the different organisations function and had the opportunity to ask questions that were relevant to my current studies as well in regards to HR practices and recruitment. I feel it

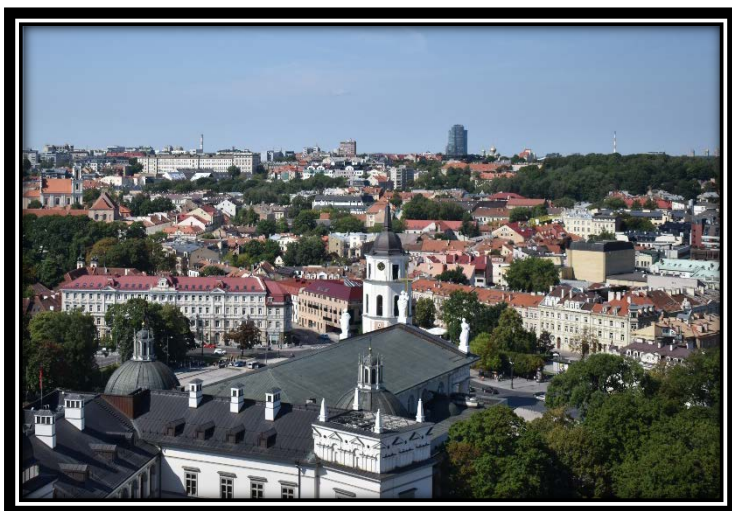


would be an immense opportunity if we could create more partnerships with organisations that may be willing to host company trips to give our students the opportunity to not only see organisations in action but also an opportunity to network as well.



Lithuania

Eastern Europe is an area which has endure a state of constant change, power shifts and uncertain borders over the centuries. Situated firmly between Germany and Russia the Baltic States live in a constant state of uncertainty and discomfort. Even in recent history Russia declared that Crimea was Russian territory and their constant conflict with the Ukraine is s constant reminder for the Baltic region how quickly things may shift and change.



Lithuania is a nation which still bears the scars of their past and Soviet occupation. Having inky become independent in 1989 the majority of adults here in Lithuania grew up and endure life under soviet

occupation. At times it was quite jarring to see the stark differences between old town in Vilnius (the baroque area that has remained relatively unchanged over the centuries) and 'new town' which was the areas built up and fashioned after soviet architecture and efficiency.

A shocking fact I learnt rather quickly in Vilnius is that you cannot flush your toilet paper. This is extremely important to know as it is very easy to

damage the plumbing and you will not make friends easily in your hotel or restaurants if you flood their bathrooms. I was lucky I noticed the signage before I could make such an error.

Language barriers

One thing I loved about Lithuania is hearing the locals speak in Lithuanian. It is a beautiful language but also one of the hardest Eastern European languages to learn. The language remains close to its origins and roots in ancient Sanskrit which makes it a particularly complex language to learn outside of Eastern Europe. However it is noteworthy that everyone in Lithuania is bilingual or trilingual, with the most common languages spoken apart from Lithuanian is Russian (particularly among the older generation) and English (more commonly spoken amongst the younger generation), this is actually a common practice throughout all of Europe as I would learn. The majority of my peers spoke a minimum of three languages at the level of fluency and were shocked to learn that Australia does not have a good track record in our primary and secondary education system in teaching foreign languages. Australia is admittedly an isolated nation and we lack the benefit of the Erasmus² program, a student study and internship mobility program, that European students benefit from. This does allow them an easy of movement through the EU which makes conversing in other languages with native speakers a great deal easier. But in this I feel Australia is shamefully behind as it is uncommon for any of our students to leave our mandatory education system with any real level of proficiency in languages other than English, and even then we are seeing an increase in functional illiteracy.

But while in Lithuania many younger people do speak English, it would not be recommended to rely entirely on English to get around in Vilnius. It is also beneficial and polite to learn a few phrases such as 'hello' (labas), 'please' (prašau), 'thank you' (ačiū) and 'excuse me' (atsiprašau) in Lithuanian.

² https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en



Food

I could write an entire essay on the culinary delights you can find in Lithuania and if there is one way to truly experience a culture it's by experiencing their local and traditional cuisine.

Lithuanian cuisine can be summed up in three words. Meat, Dairy and Potatoes. But don't be mistaken in imagining their cuisine to be boring or lacking in flavour.

I had the pleasure of trying out a few different dishes during my time in Vilnius such as the Cepplina, a massive Potato dumpling filled with either a meat filling served with sour cream and bacon or a curd cheese filling served with sour cream, and šaltibarščiai, a Cold beetroot soup served with either boiled or fried potatoes, were the two stand out dishes I had the pleasure of trying.

But not all delights you can experience must come from a restaurant or café, one of my favourite things to do is explore local supermarkets and Lithuania has two major chains which people frequent, Maxima and Rimi which are both Hypermarts which are massive and carry every conceivable item you may want or need. But I digress, when I got tired of frequenting restaurants and wanted a quiet night in I would go down to Maxima and pick a new salad from the deli to try and my goodness to Lithuanians love their salads!





Lithuanian cuisine is hearty, filling and so very delicious. They say you can learn a lot about a culture by looking at their cuisine. Lithuanian cuisine has strong influences, not only by the climate, but their history as well. From cold and harsh winters to the soviet influences Lithuanian cuisine is a delicious

experience you need to explore whilst in Vilnius!



Museums.

There are so many museums in Lithuania, you cannot walk for more than a few steps without encountering one! Which as a lover of history and art I found this to be one of the most wonderful aspects of my trip. While studying and classes did take the bulk of my time in Lithuania I did make

sure to seize the moments I could to explore the KGB museum, The Jewish Museum of Tolerance and the National Galleries. Here the beauty and history of the nation comes alive, both in its victories and hardships. At times it would seem almost impossible to imagine how, within living memory, Lithuania was under Soviet rule.



Walking tour around Old Town Vilnius



As part of the programme of which I could take part was the opportunity to take the guided walking tour around Old Vilnius in which we would see and hear the history of this ancient and wonderful city. Our guide was Regina Lakačauskaitė Kaminskienė³ whose depth of knowledge and passion for the history of our country was infectious. It was amazing to walk around old Vilnius and listening to her describe the different moments in her nation's

history, the good, the bad and the ugly. I cannot help but recommend any students who may undertake an ISM exchange to ensure they go on this walking tour, it broadened my mind to the different challenges and nature of international relations in Europe and the devastating effects the Soviet period had, not only on the people but, on industries as well.



³ Regina Lakačauskaitė Kaminskienė Guided Tour, email address: regina.la.ka@gmail.com
no: +370 678 046. Website: <https://www.visitlithuania.net/guides-service/english/1489-regina-lakaciauskaite-kaminskiene>

CityBee

Like most countries in Europe, Lithuania is at the forefront of innovation. Here in the wonderful city of Vilnius is the car, Bike and e-scooter rental system called CityBee⁴ why do I mention this in my experiences in Lithuania? Because of my sheer amazement at how well they system works! Cutting down on traffic and parking congestion as well as reducing their environmental impact. CityBee is an app-based system

which users pay per minute they use the bikes or e-scooters (cars are based on distance as well as time) in which commuters may easily get around town and leave the bike or scooter at their destination. While this may seem chaotic it works so well here in Vilnius that it has made me wonder if it would be possible to implement something similar in Ballarat? A possible work integrated learning assignment perhaps?



Why more Federation University students should take this opportunity

This exchange has truly been the experience of a lifetime. Not only did I travel to a foreign nation and experience a different culture and interact with so many different people. I had the opportunity to learn critical business skills and perspectives from the teachers at ISM University. In a world where the business boundaries of nations are slowly disappearing and the interconnected global communication across oceans and cultures are becoming the standard, now more than ever our students need a global perspective. A perspective which is difficult to gain in Australia. Our nation is multi-cultural, but we are also isolated and separated from the rest of the world. Just from my short time in Lithuania I have learned and experienced so much that I may never have experienced had I not

⁴ CityBee website <https://www.citybee.lt/lt>

undertaken this opportunity. However, I fear opportunities like ISM universities summer in the Baltic's course may 'fly under the radar' of most Federation University students. This is why I have written this report, to encourage and promote exchange opportunities for my fellow business students. It was a profound opportunity to attend ISM, to represent our University and our Nation. The ISM exchange program is a wonderful option for students wishing to explore another country, learn from a different perspective and perhaps escape the Ballarat winter.



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Regina Lakačauskaitė Kaminskienė Guided Tour, email address:

regina.la.ka@gmail.com

no: +370 678 046. Website: [https://www.visitlithuania.net/guides-](https://www.visitlithuania.net/guides-service/english/1489-regina-lakaciauskaite-kaminskiene)

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Tim Van Wijk, email: info@pirmasblynas.lt No: +370 617 93037 website:

<http://www.pirmasblynas.lt/about-us>

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