

SELF-REFLECTION

In the summer of 2025, I had the great honor of joining the United College GOAL Programme, an opportunity that became one of the most memorable experiences of my academic journey. My destination was the University of California, Berkeley, where I enrolled in a summer course that challenged me to expand my academic horizons and explore new perspectives in learning. Beyond the classroom, the experience allowed me to step into a completely different cultural and social environment, encouraging me to adapt, communicate, and connect with people from diverse backgrounds. By immersing myself in both rigorous academic study and the vibrant campus life at Berkeley, I not only strengthened my knowledge but also gained valuable personal growth that continues to influence the way I approach challenges and opportunities today.

The course I took was titled “Contemporary Japanese Society and Culture Through Film.” Over the span of three weeks, I explored various aspects of Japanese culture and engaged in discussions with classmates from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, including the United States, Canada, Japan, China, and India. The class was both intellectually engaging and academically demanding, requiring strong critical thinking skills, self-directed learning, and active participation in discussions. Our professor consistently encouraged us to raise questions and critically examine established ideas, which I found to be a refreshing departure from the more lecture-centered approach I was familiar with in my home institution.

Participating in this scheme has been a great way to achieve my summer goals. Academically, my courses at UC Berkeley provided me with new insights and analytical skills. The professor not only delivered content but also facilitated discussions that pushed me to think critically and articulate my arguments clearly. I found myself becoming more confident in speaking up in class and engaging in intellectual debates. Culturally, the diversity of Berkeley community surpassed my expectations. I learned how to navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively with people from various backgrounds. Sharing experiences with classmates and roommates helped me develop a stronger sense of global citizenship. On a personal level, living alone in a new environment requires adaptability and resilience. From managing my daily schedule to finding my way around the city, every challenge became an opportunity for growth. By the end of the programme, I felt more independent and capable of handling unfamiliar situations. Overall, the programme not only met but exceeded my initial goals. It provided me with academic inspiration, cultural insights, and personal development that will continue to shape my future.

Berkeley is a place with a long and storied history, a vibrant academic atmosphere, and a deep tradition of scientific exploration, having nurtured numerous Nobel laureates over the years. As I wandered through the physics building on campus, I was amazed to come across a modest corner office that once belonged to Oppenheimer himself. Standing there, I felt the weight of history

merging seamlessly with the present—the legacy of past brilliance quietly resonating within the walls that continue to inspire new generations of scholars.



Figure 1: Offices of Oppenheimer

Beyond academics, the campus itself was not only a place of learning but also a vibrant and dynamic community that left a deep impression on me.

Berkeley has long been recognized for its rich history of social movements, traditions of intellectual activism, and its remarkable cultural diversity, and I could truly sense this atmosphere in the rhythm of everyday life and in the countless small interactions across campus. Walking through its pathways, I could feel the energy of open dialogue, critical thinking, and a spirit of questioning authority that seemed to permeate the university's culture.

For instance, when I passed near the North Gate, I noticed a sign for the Center for Independent Journalism, and this simple sight became unexpectedly powerful for me. It represented Berkeley's commitment to the free exchange of ideas and independent voices, values that resonated deeply and reminded me of the university's longstanding dedication to empowering individuals to speak up and contribute meaningfully to society.

These experiences broadened my understanding of the role universities play not only in education

but also in shaping public discourse.



Figure 2: Center for Independent Journalism in UC Berkeley

One of the most striking aspects of UC Berkeley was its strong commitment to diversity and inclusivity. This commitment was evident in both institutional policies and everyday practices. At the institutional level, UC Berkeley actively promotes diversity through its curriculum, student organizations, and campus events. Many courses incorporated themes of equity, representation, and social justice. Additionally, the university frequently organized workshops and seminars on topics such as racial equality, gender inclusivity, and mental health awareness. What's more, Berkeley often sends me emails promoting diversity and preventing discrimination and sexual harassment, although I'm only a short-term international student.

A specific practice I admired was the way faculty and staff fostered inclusive classroom environments. Professors made a conscious effort to ensure every student's voice was heard. They encouraged students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to share their perspectives, and they valued these contributions as essential to the learning process. This created a classroom culture where students felt respected and empowered to participate. From my

perspective as an international student, these practices made me feel welcomed and included. I never felt like an outsider, but rather a valued member of the community. This inclusive environment not only enriched my learning experience but also demonstrated the importance of diversity in higher education.

My study abroad experience at UC Berkeley was a rewarding and transformative journey. It provided me with academic enrichment, cultural immersion, and personal growth, all of which aligned with the goals I set before joining the programme. The exposure to Berkeley's commitment to diversity and inclusivity left a lasting impression on me. The knowledge, experiences, and friendships I gained during this summer will continue to influence my academic and personal path in the years ahead.

Going to the United States is very expensive, and as an undergraduate student, I don't have sufficient funds. ROA alleviated my financial concerns, allowing me to fully immerse myself in the cultural exchange at UC Berkeley. I am very grateful to the HKSAR Government Scholarship Fund for the support they provided us. To potential ROA recipients, I want to say that when you want to participate in an exchange program but are limited by financial constraints, don't hesitate to apply for ROA—it could be the timely support you need.

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