

The Challenge of Denmark

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The education

Going to Denmark was for me the opportunity to change. After four years of engineering studies in France, I needed something different. The French system, especially for engineering, is based on a strong elitism. The first two or three years of higher education are spent in prep schools where one learns maths, physics and chemistry in a theoretical way. The main goal, if not the only one, is to pass with the highest grade possible the final exam. The better the ranking, the more prestigious school one can get. The Danish system is just the opposite: A democratic approach where the students are not put in competition between each other but more encouraged to cooperate and realize projects together. More than half of my courses in DTU were validated through group work and report writing.

The whole system is driven by a socialist mentality: everybody is equal and nobody should stand out. The main drawback is that the system does not value exceptional students and does not help them to be more exceptional. On the other hand, this equality allows for easy communication inside the university. I was always amazed of the cooperation of university professor in the mere work of a master's student.

Social life in the university

The master program I followed in DTU was dedicated to international students. I spent the two first years of my stay in Denmark mostly with international students. We formed a quite tight community: everybody went through the same problems like finding an accommodation or getting a residence permit. Most of the social events were organized by international students for international students. If one enjoys social life, it is difficult to feel lonely: there is always a group of people to hang around with, to go visit some place or simply to go to town.

Staying longer in Denmark: The necessity of leaning Danish

I can divide my life in Denmark in two parts. First I was there as an international student. Most of my friends were foreigners and apart from the people I shared the kitchen with in the dorms, I did not know so many Danes. At that time, I was following Danish courses. I did not really feel the need for speaking Danish, as it is easy to communicate in English. I mixed English and Danish in the shops and at the dorms, trying to improve my understanding of the language with the minimum effort possible.

When I finished my masters, I decided to stay for a PhD. At that time, I did not really think about staying longer at the beginning. Being rather lazy at the Danish course, I ended up quitting.

After a bit more than a year in my PhD, I realized that I actually liked Denmark and that I would like to make part of my life here. The combination of success in PhD and an improved standard of living made me realize how enjoyable the life can be in

Copenhagen. At the same time, I realized that I had very few friends in Denmark as most of the international students, whom I finished my degree with, were now gone home. I tried to tie up with Danes, both at work and in social events, but I realized the necessity of knowing Danish.

This is to me the main paradox of Denmark. The English language is a part of the culture, to the extent that you can see and hear advertisements in English that are not translated. It is also possible to go in almost any shop or any facility and get easily one's way in English. As a scientist, I use English at work for communicating with my colleagues and my superiors. Everybody, especially in the young generation, speaks English to a level that allows for social activities. But it is not enough: in the parties, the jokes are in Danish, the songs that people like to sing are in Danish. To my opinion, it is almost impossible to blend and understand the Danes if one does not speak Danish well enough to attend social events in Danish. Learning Danish is more than just learning a language, it is blending into a culture that is after all very different from the one of my home country. It is less striking than going to China or Africa, but this subtlety makes the adaptation more difficult and lengthy.

The last word: Meeting the Danes

If you come from a culture that is based on Western Europe values, it is not a challenge to come and live in Denmark. The welfare system is everywhere to a sometimes startling extent. And the education is of good quality. In Copenhagen, there is no difficulty to find people from all over the world in the student cafes or directly in the University.

The challenge is to meet Danes, and to make good friends of them. They sometimes do not seem welcoming, but my experience showed that they appreciate that foreigners are interested in their culture. They also have problems to bind with people who stay only for a few months, as it takes time and energy for them to accept new friends. Learning Danish and using it will help a lot and will open a number of doors to Danish homes. There is an effort to make to be accepted in Denmark on a long-term basis. But I think it is worth it. Having a Dane as a real friend is almost having a friend for life.