

EXCHANGE STUDENT EVALUATION REPORT

Student Name: Christopher Blado
Institution where you studied: Aarhus University (AU)
Semester of participation: Summer 2014
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1. Pre-Exchange. Why and Where:

- a. Why did you decide to study in the US or Denmark as an exchange student?
- I have always been fascinated by Scandinavian culture and society. My research in graduate school has involved comparative study of political economy between different European countries. Studying in Denmark was an opportunity to experience firsthand a country I had read about but didn't otherwise know very much about.
- b. Why did you select the program/University?
- The University of Washington has a direct exchange with Aarhus University, which I knew ahead of time would make credit transfers very easy. And Aarhus University runs a very good summer school program, as I found out. They attract students from all around the world for their courses. For my interests, the course selection at Aarhus University was superior to that of the other Danish universities I looked at, and I took classes that genuinely aided my experience as a graduate student.
- c. What were your expectations?
- I didn't know what to expect, honestly. I knew that it is common for Danes to speak English very well, and I knew that Aarhus was the second-largest city in Denmark, but a mid-size city by American standards. I didn't know much about Aarhus University besides what I saw online, but it looked like a reputable university with a beautiful campus. That's about it.
- d. What preparations did you make prior to departure?
- The first preparation was purchasing a pocket Danish-English dictionary from a used book store. I found it very helpful, particularly when grocery shopping. The second preparation was getting from Seattle to Aarhus, which isn't served directly by an airport. I purchased my main ticket, from Seattle to Copenhagen, far in advance. But I waited to figure out how to get from Copenhagen to Aarhus. In retrospect this shouldn't have been a difficult decision. But I complicated it by equivocating between taking the train and flying to Tirstrup airport, 20 miles away from Aarhus. I eventually decided to fly, but the only ticket I could purchase at that late date left me with too little time, and I missed my flight. Fortunately the customer service agent at the SAS ticket counter was sympathetic and got me on a later flight. Part of the complication also arose from the fact that the student employees managing the dorms and handing out keys were set to close up shop early on the day of my arrival. I convinced them to stay open a bit longer, long

enough for me to arrive on my later flight and pick up the key to my dorm room.

e. How could you improve your preparations?

- I should not have overcomplicated the journey from Copenhagen to Aarhus. But given the time squeeze (in regards to picking up my key) I don't know exactly what I could have done differently.

2. ARRIVAL/ON-SITE ORIENTATION:

a. Recommend accommodations for future students upon arrival.

- Have a good travel itinerary worked out, and communicate ahead of time with the people you'll be living with (or who will be handing out the dorm keys).

b. Comment on the orientation and activities offered at both your home University and the host University, what did it cover and how did it help you prepare / adjust after arriving?

- I didn't attend orientation activities at UW. At AU I went to a coffee and snack reception in the international student house, which was nice. But in the summer it had reduced hours, so it wasn't as available as it would normally be.

2. ACADEMICS:

a. Evaluate the instruction you received. Compare the following to your home institution's system:

- class registration

- Class registration was fairly straightforward, although there was an intermediate waiting period after signing up in which I didn't know if I had gotten in to the classes I wanted. The two classes I took were "Negotiation" and "Public Sector Motivation (PSM)".

- classroom structure

- Same/similar to the US.

- instruction

- Instruction was similar to the US, and in English. The Negotiation professor was very good, as was the PSM professor.

- teacher/student relations

- Teacher/student relations were very good. Both instructors were very personable and approachable.

- grading/exams

- Grading was very different than in the US. Apparently Denmark has a reputation throughout Europe for having a tough grading system. There is a strong tendency toward "averaging." That is, most of the work that most students produce will be seen as "of average quality." As an American, the result for me was that I did work that in graduate courses at UW would get 3.5-3.8 grades, but at AU was seen as 2.7-3.0 level. This had an unintended consequence for me as the first course I took at AU slightly lowered my overall GPA. After that experience I knew I had to get serious with the second course, and I studied harder for that course than, with the exception of maybe 2 courses at UW, any other UW course I've taken. The result of this high level of effort was a grade of "slightly above average." Overall I'd say it was a learning experience, in more ways than one.
- **Exams were very different than in the US.**
 - First, if you want to take both the course and the final exam (which will give you credit for the course) you need to sign up for them separately.

- Second, the exams take place in different campus buildings at different times than when the class is held, and are administered by neutral observers. The course instructor is not present (and indeed, is not allowed to be present).
 - Third, the testing location is a secure location, in which test taker must bring their own laptop and submit the test electronically. I learned that in previous years, every student was required to bring their own individual printer as well, to print out hard copies of their exam work. This seemed bizarre to me, but students and professors I talked to said it was true. Only in last couple years was this requirement relaxed.
 - Fourth, the test is graded by neutral anonymous graders, as well as by the instructor. In a case in which the instructor and the neutral grader disagree on a grade, the neutral grader's decision wins out.
- administration
 - I didn't observe any significant differences with regard to administration. Everyone I talked to was very kind and helpful.
 - library, computer, and classroom facilities
 - I didn't see any real differences with regard to facilities.
- b. Evaluate the quality and content of instruction.**
- The quality and content of instruction was very good. I didn't perceive any significant differences between AU and UW in this regard. The two courses I took at AU were very different from each other. The first, Negotiation, required significant interpersonal interaction and not much written work. The second, Public Sector Motivation, required much more written work and reading than interpersonal interaction. In both cases I found that the course content served the subject matter well.
- c. In general, what did you like best and least about the academics?**
- As an American I was a bit shocked by the Danish grading system, although in retrospect it makes sense. I think part of the difference is that in the US, students pay tens of thousands of dollars for school. This makes school programs reluctant to tell their students that they are merely "average." But in Denmark this financial burden is removed from students. Indeed, my friends in Denmark get paid the equivalent of US \$1000 per month by the government as a living stipend for students. That takes some of the sting off of being told you're merely "average."
- d. Are there any courses or instructors you would recommend to future students?**
- My course of study was fairly specific to my interests, so not really.

3. HOUSING:

- a. How would you assess the housing arrangements?**
- The housing was alright. I lived in student housing on the outskirts of Aarhus, in a complex called the Villhelm Kiers Kollegium. Given how expensive housing is in Denmark, this was the only affordable option for me. I had a small dorm room with my own bathroom, and a common space that was shared with a dozen or so people. My dormmates there were really friendly, and I made some great friendships with them.
 - However, the housing complex is quite far away from the Aarhus University campus. It's about a 40 minute walk, or a \$5 bus ride plus a 15 minute walk. The housing is located in an area of town that is mainly known for its large immigrant population, which was really interesting in itself. But it also meant that there weren't really any businesses in the area. No coffee shops, cafes,

restaurants, or stores. The few places that did exist (a hot dog stand and an ice cream store) were a 20 minute walk away, and were often closed for summer vacation. Throughout that larger region of Aarhus (known as Hasle), the vast majority of shops and restaurants were closed while I was there for summer vacation. The downtown businesses were open, but again that was a significant distance away. Long story short, it often felt difficult to mix with people casually in public, the way I like to do while reading a book at a cafe or something.

- b.** How did you locate your housing?
 - I used the Aarhus University website.

4. EXCHANGE SITE:

In general, please describe your impressions of the host University campus and its location and surrounding community.

- The Aarhus University campus is beautiful. The buildings are built with tan-colored brick and light wood, apparently designed by the famous architect C.F. Moller in a functionalist style. The campus is spread out over considerable distance, although much of the area is taken up by large parks and pavilions.

5. HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Describe any health or safety concerns (e.g., quality of medical facilities, unsafe districts, theft, etc.) associated with your study.

- The outer-Hasle area where I lived has a reputation for being a rough neighborhood. There is a low-income housing complex nearby called Bispehaven, which has the same reputation throughout Denmark as perhaps Cabrini-Green or South Central LA in the US. Supposedly Denmark's most famous rapper grew up there. Also, my friends referred to the Fakta grocery store where I shopped as the "Death-Fakta" because apparently someone was shot there 10 years ago. I didn't let these urban legends bother me, though. Statistically the average American city is far more dangerous than any Danish city, so I laughed it off when these ideas came up.

6. CULTURAL ASPECTS:

- a.** How did you integrate into the host country culture and meet members of the community? (e.g., mentors, clubs, sports, extracurricular activities, pubs, etc.)
 - My classmates and dormmates were very personable. I would say that this was my favorite part of being in Denmark, in fact. With everyone I met there seemed to be a sense of easygoing happiness. I made dinner with friends often, went to movies and bars, sat around and played cards. Overall it was very easy to fit in. I also ended up acting as a sound guy for a friend's concert, which was fun.

- b.** Describe cultural differences and challenges you encountered and how you addressed them. (e.g., gender issues, social etiquette, stereotypes, etc.)
 - The cultural differences I noticed were subtle. But I will say that compared to Americans, Danes are both more laid-back and more practical. Danish society seems to function very smoothly compared to American society due to these cultural traits. Danish society also seems much less ideologically-engaged than American society. To be strongly engaged in politics along ideological lines is common in the US, but in Denmark this is seen as rather quaint and unnecessary.

7. FINANCIAL:

- a. Describe how the Scan|Design Foundation Fellowship assisted you / made a difference in your decision to study abroad.
 - The Scan/Design Fellowship was the deciding factor in my decision to study in Denmark. The award made it possible to afford the plane ticket and housing costs for the summer.
- b. What is the best way to access/transfer money?
 - I used my VISA and Mastercard debit cards, but they only worked at specific ATM's. So I generally withdrew enough cash for a few days at a time and then used that.
- c. How much spending money do you recommend per month? Please include rent, food, transportation, etc.
 - This is a tough question. I will say, "more than you expect to use." Housing and food are both expensive in Denmark, and going out to eat, or out to a bar, was quite expensive. I would treat myself perhaps twice per week, but even then it added up quickly.
- d. Comment on the relative "cost of living" between your home University and the host University.
 - The cost of living was much, much higher in Denmark. I found the cost-of-living comparison website Numbeo very helpful beforehand:
<http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/comparison.jsp>

8. EXCHANGE/SCAN | DESIGN FELLOWSHIP ADMINISTRATION:

Comment on the assistance and activities by the Scan|Design Fellowship coordinator before your departure, upon arrival, and during your stay. What worked and what could be improved or changed?

- Since it was a summer program, the level of involvement and coordination was not particularly high. I didn't mind, however. For the six weeks I was in Aarhus I had plenty to keep me busy. Although, a former affiliate of Scan-Design program, who had studied at UW and now lives in Aarhus, did take me out for lunch one day. That was very much appreciated.

9. PROGRAM/STUDENT TYPE:

Describe the type of student for whom this exchange is best suited and what advice would you give to future students.

- I was a bit surprised that I was the first student to take summer courses at Aarhus University through the ScanDesign fellowship, since UW has a direct exchange program with them. So I would say that this should be emphasized more as a possible option for UW students. Overall I had a great experience and learned a lot, and my credits transferred afterwards too. Obviously Copenhagen gets a lot of attention as a destination for study abroad, but I found Aarhus to be a charming destination as well, and Aarhus University puts together a serious summer school program.

10. OVERALL EXPERIENCE:

- a. How would you rate the quality of the overall experience?
 - Am I using the Danish or the American grading scale? Ok, just kidding. I would rate it as a very good experience. In retrospect I would have tried to live closer to the University, in an area of Aarhus that had a bit more happening, but that's my only complaint. Overall, I had a great time.

- b.** How realistic were your academic and personal expectations and how did the Scan|Design Fellowship Program make a difference?
- I think my expectations were reasonable. The classes were a bit harder than I anticipated, but I adjusted eventually. The ScanDesign Fellowship Program as a huge help, since it covered airfare and housing costs for me. I wouldn't have been able to do this program if it weren't for the ScanDesign Foundation.
- c.** What did you consider to be the greatest benefit and challenge of studying abroad?
- The greatest challenge was trying to perform at a high level academically while in a foreign place. But I would say the greatest benefit was being able to work through that experience and be a stronger scholar as a result.

FEEL FREE TO ADD OTHER COMMENTS YOU MAY HAVE.