

Study Abroad in Scandinavia: The Happy Compromise for the English-only Student

by Dr. Joan Solaun, Director Study Abroad Office, U of Illinois/Urbana



At last count, over 50,000 American students were studying abroad, but only 674 were doing so in Scandinavia. Study Abroad advisors faced with students with no second language capability, who are not interested in developing same or who are just plain turned off by foreign language, usually end up recommending the same old English-speaking options--Great Britain, Ireland, Australia and even neighboring Canada! They may be overlooking Scandinavia, where students can participate in a very different cultural experience, yet not be totally isolated.

American students will find out what generations of tourists have discovered: in the major cities of Scandinavia, just about everyone speaks English. This includes the entire student population in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. Scandinavian societies have much to offer our students. It's time we took a second look at this underutilized opportunity. One way to do so is to think of Scandinavia as a happy study abroad compromise for the English-only student; a foreign language culture with few of the disadvantages.

Q: What can students gain from study in Scandinavia?

A: Programs for foreigners designed by Scandinavian educators have emphasized quality of life and work issues peculiar to the area. In other words, when the foreign language is not an issue, the content of the courses take on primary importance.

Q: But shouldn't we encourage our students to learn the language of the country in which they are studying?

A: Of course we should, and some students become very involved with one of the Scandinavian languages. The point is, students may be *afraid* to explore this part of the world because they don't realize how accessible the culture is to them, precisely because of the lack of a major language barrier.

Q: How are the study abroad programs structured in Scandinavia?

A: In addition to the direct enrollment opportunities for students capable of taking regular classes, there are three principal types of programs: first, there are those organized by Scandinavian institutions that provide special classes taught in English, such as the Danish International Study (DIS) program in Copenhagen, the University of Lund's "International Swedish University," the University of Oslo's summer school and full-year program, and the University of Stockholm's diploma program in post-graduate legal studies. All of these options provide language courses as well. Then there are the small exchange programs between American and Scandinavian universities, particularly in areas of high Scandinavian

ethnic origin, such as Minnesota. Somewhere in between these options is the highly creative Scandinavian Seminar program which, in conjunction with the Scandinavian folk school system, offers an academic year option where a student goes in one end with no foreign language and comes out the other fluent in Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic or Finnish. Finally, there are group programs sponsored by U.S. colleges and universities such as Michigan State's semester or year program.

Q: How much interest is there in study in Scandinavia at this time?

A: Numbers are not very high. The Institute of International Education (IIE) study abroad census for the 1987-88 academic year indicates that 674 U.S. students went to Scandinavia for academic purposes. The

greatest number went to Denmark (244), closely followed by Sweden (239). Less interest was shown in Finland (80), Norway (68) and Iceland (43).

Q: Why are so few students taking advantage of the Scandinavian opportunity? Aren't the languages close enough to German to be manageable?

A: With the exception of those parts of our country where the Scandinavian heritage is strong, Scandinavia has an image problem. The major languages are thought to be very hard to learn, or not worth learning for professional purposes, as compared to German, French or Spanish. Students may fear that Swedish, Danish and Norwegian are as unusual as Finnish, which, they may have heard, does not belong to any of the linguistic families. Scandi-

navian Studies as an area is available at only 33 universities in our country; Danish is offered at 16 schools, Norwegian in 24 schools, Swedish in 32 schools, Finnish at 7, and Old Norse at 12 (*Directory of Scandinavian Studies, 1989*). It would appear that there is little encouragement on U.S. campuses for undergraduates to look into these languages and little encouragement to enroll in them when they return from a sojourn in Scandinavia--the point at which enthusiasm is highest. In the current financial climate in academia, this picture can't be expected to improve, even if student demand were to rise. Before Scandinavianists jump all over me, I want to remind them that study abroad offices, dealing principally with undergraduates, do not see that many scholars with a linguistic commitment. We see students who want to broaden their horizons, who want something extra on their resumes and who worry about graduating on time. This does not leave much room for a new language with apparently little payoff when they get back home.

Q: We get back to the original question: why study in Scandinavia?

A: Scandinavia offers our students a living laboratory in a socialist welfare system with all the pluses and minuses. The widespread use of English enables them to actively participate in discussions and become involved in issues now

crucial to our country as well--national health, welfare, care for the aged, planning for leisure time; education, man's relationship to nature and the environment, and design of all kinds. Although Scandinavians groan under heavy taxes, most would not want to live in our system, which they find "cruel." Scandinavia provides at once a doorway to Europe and a culturally unique experience all its own. Sweden and Norway are rethinking participating in the EEC, and Denmark already belongs. Professionally, it is an excellent option for our business students, and programs such as the DIS in Denmark provide an outstanding opportunity to develop a European perspective in the field of management, labor relations and marketing.

Q: What problems will students encounter in Scandinavia?

A: All Scandinavian programs are very expensive, because Scandinavia is expensive. Generous social policies, such as the highest unemployment benefits in the world, add to the overall cost of living. The climate and long nights can be depressing. Alcoholism is a serious problem. These once peaceful societies also are experiencing more of the kind of unpleasantness we associate with the rest of the world. Finally, students will discover that it is unproductive to avoid language study completely; they won't be

able to read signs or understand announcements on trains, etc.

Q: We often hear that there are some major differences between life in Scandinavia and the United States. How should we begin to explain this part of the world to our students?

A: The differences in lifestyles are directly related to the fact that Scandinavian societies are progressive, egalitarian societies. They are in the forefront of modern social organizations. They have developed outstanding social services, and as Europeans know, outstanding products in many areas, from agriculture to industrial technology. The lifestyle is more liberal than anything our students may have experienced. This requires a good deal of cultural adjustment, and students should be advised not to make snap, moralistic judgments. Scandinavian societies enjoy a level of freedom and acceptance that seem amazing to young Americans, and thus provide a clear example of why we encourage our students to travel; there is more than one way to look at the world, more than one set of values.

Americans are well accepted and welcomed in local families, although long commutes are the rule. ■

Space limitations have required us to make general statements about the area as a whole. In fact, we are covering five individual nations: Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland, each with its own special personality, cultural heritage and strengths. We encourage advisors to talk to their faculty in Germanic languages and literatures if there are no visible signs of interest in Scandinavia on their campuses. This will help you to find out about any specialized interests among faculty in one or more of these countries and thus develop a coherent campus approach toward Study in Scandinavia.

The American-Scandinavian Foundation is the best source of information. They publish a full listing of all programs--both academic and work-related--and can be contacted as follows:

The American-
Scandinavian Foundation
127 East 73rd St.
New York, NY 10021
Tel: 212-879-9779



Nona Anderson, Associate Director of Overseas Programs at Michigan State, is this column's guest collaborator. MSU sends over 150 students to Denmark, Finland and Sweden on its program every year.