

Faculty of Life Sciences (LIFE), University of Copenhagen, WS 2011/12

The Faculty of Life Sciences (LIFE) is a faculty of the University of Copenhagen. However, it had been an independent educational institution titled “Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University” until 2007 when it was incorporated into the University of Copenhagen. This former independence was still sensible in a very positive way during my studies. All relevant offices and institutions were present at the faculty and the processes were well organized and coordinated. Only few issues had to take the long way via the main-university. In consequence also the application at the host university was unproblematic and quick and all information needed was provided by the International Office of the Faculty.

The Housing Department of the Faculty was responsible for organizing accommodation for the exchange students on request. Therefore an application form had to be filled in specifying the wishes and preferences and also the maximum rent acceptable. There is no “too early” for sending the application as there is only limited number of rooms available. And even when sending the application really early it is very unlikely that your requests are fulfilled. In the end I was offered a bed in a double room of 18m² at a rent of 500€ per month which did not meet my wishes at all. Prices for accommodation are horribly high in Copenhagen and other exchange students I spoke to had to pay a lot more for the accommodation offered by university. I finally decided to search the private housing market for alternatives. On <http://www.boligportal.dk/> I succeeded and finally rented a room in a shared apartment at 480€ per month. In general the housing market in Copenhagen is very difficult and landlords always can choose from many interested persons – you need to be lucky that they choose an exchange student.

The education at the Faculty of Life Sciences was in general well organized and high level – of course, similar to Germany, level varies with course responsible and lecturers. However, studying at Copenhagen University is somewhat different from studying at University of Hohenheim or other German universities for several reasons: First of all, semester structure is different. One semester is divided into two blocks. In each block you normally take two courses of 7.5 ECTS each. So exams are not piling up at the end of the semester but studying is more continuous. Above that, Danish course responsables have more imagination regarding the design of the evaluation of the students. Apart from traditional reports, written exams and oral examinations at the end of the block they also do continuous assessment, portfolio exercises, multiple choice tests, 24h-exams or simply adjust traditional exams to their needs. Group works also play an important role but individual evaluation of the students is normally guaranteed. A third important difference to studying in Germany is the studying atmosphere and culture. The relation to the professor is very relaxed and familiar, forenames are used in communication and the lecturer can be easily approached with topic and course related questions and problems. The interest of the lecturer in the academic and educational progress of the student is evident and support is provided. Courses are not just restricted to ex-cathedra teaching but frequent exercises and active participation of students is integral part of the course. It is also relevant to read the course literature which provides with in depth and background knowledge. These described experiences I made while attending the three following courses at the Faculty of Life Sciences: Applied Plant Nutrition, Fruit and Berry Crop Physiology, Seed Science and Technology.

Life in Copenhagen is very relaxed. Standard of living is high and class differences among Danes are hardly observable. Most Danes speak English perfectly and the Danes in Copenhagen are used to strangers. Although certainly inappropriate to generalize, I experienced Danes to be polite and friendly. However, it can't be denied that they are also reserved, especially when the initial phase of small talks is over. Danish students have their own well established social network of family and friends and building up relationships takes time. At university you certainly have contact with Danes in your courses, but nevertheless sports clubs are a great opportunity for additional social contacts. I joined USG, a sports association for students in Copenhagen where you can choose from many different activities (<http://www.usg.dk/English/WelcometoUSG/tabid/293/Default.aspx>). As a total beginner I took part in a fencing course which provided relaxation from university stress and contact to especially Danish students at the same time. Of course, there are also many other international students at the Faculty of Life Science. Being in the same social situation it is much easier to get into contact and spend your free time together with them. However, going out is quite costly as prices in gastronomy, cafes and bars are generally high. Also travelling around Denmark by public transport is not cheap. In Copenhagen itself, bicycle is the preferred mean of transportation and there is special road infrastructure for bikers which one first needs to get used to. If you don't want to get your bike stolen, ensure that you don't just lock it up but fasten it to some bicycle rack. Who is interested in culture can also visit the many different museums in Copenhagen. Most of them have one day a week when you don't have to pay any entrance fee. Shopping for daily needs is mainly done in supermarkets (Netto, Irma, SuperBrugsen, Føtex). Their assortment is more basic and prices are high.

In summary, a semester abroad in Copenhagen is really costly and hard work as courses are of high level. In return you receive good education and you experience a Danish lifestyle which is not easy to understand but which provides you with the chance to see things from a different angle. When just looking at Denmark and Danish society superficially you may not see many differences to Germany, however, when trying to get an in-depth understanding it is getting much more difficult to get access to the culture especially when lacking detailed knowledge of language and history of the country. Culture shock is not obvious and differences, though present, are hard to identify.

Regarding the organization and unique position of the Faculty of Life Sciences within the University of Copenhagen things are presently changing. The Faculty of Life Sciences is being closed, the veterinarians merged with the medical faculty and the rest with the faculty of sciences. This restructuring is likely to also affect the experienced study environment of future exchange students of agriculture at the University of Copenhagen. This should be respected when reading this report.