A Semester at SDU – Report

In the following report I wish to describe my semester at SDU, Syddansk Universitet or the University of Southern Denmark. It is located in Odense in Denmark, amongst other places, but this one is the only one relevant for the science courses and to my knowledge the largest campus. I will begin by going through the preparation phase, explaining what needs to be done before one can go study there, which will include accommodation. This will be fairly brief just to give an impression and a detailed explanation will be at the end and can be skipped unless one wants to know the details. Next I will talk about how it was to study at SDU and what one can do in one's spare time. Finally I will end with my best and my worst experience during my stay.

So let us begin with the preparation. It starts by applying for an ERASMUS scholarship, which is rather uncomplicated and mostly done online. Next, after you were accepted and SDU was notified, you have to apply there as well, which is a bit more work. Aside from the normal information and expected documents like transcripts and nomination, they also require a documentation of language skills and the faculty of science wants a course description of all the courses taken so far. The first simply involves getting a given form signed, the latter however is quite tedious. Next you select the courses you want to take, which is preliminary and you are informed in case some are not offered and substitutes are given. Once you know what courses you will be taking you can get the learning agreement signed, upload the letter of acceptance and sign the grant agreement once you get them. Accommodation is organised by SDU if you sign up for it and completely unproblematic in this case. This concludes the preparation of the exchange, so we can continue and look at the lectures at SDU next.

Studying in Denmark was not really different from studying here, which makes this point rather quick to cover. I have no intention into going into detail on the lectures that I took but overall I was very happy with the lot of them. All of them were in English and with one exception they were all worth attending (but that lecture was also fine content wise, it was just more effective to read instead of showing up). All my exams were oral ones like here but I should note that written ones are done using one's own computer, so having access to one could be necessary. A lot of things there are done digitally, including the handing in of assignments but all of it is rather unproblematic. Additionally I did not manage to meet a single unfriendly or unhelpful person during my stay, so getting help was really easy. One helpful thing regarding the university itself is that there is an app called “SDU Maps” which lets you enter the room you are looking for and it will lead you to it, which is very helpful as the numbering system seems to be highly arbitrary.

Aside from that there is not a lot to say except that they have a good computer lab and that the canteen is expensive, you pay by weight and quite a lot, so cooking is rather unavoidable.

Next up would be free time but I must admit this is not something I had too much of and so I cannot give a great amount of information on this. Something I discovered very quickly is that a Facebook account seems to be essential in Denmark as they use it for everything; and this is something I do not have. You can become part of ESN, the ERASMUS student network, for which there will be ample opportunity during the orientation days. I chose not to do this precisely because they are organised through Facebook and I would have missed all the events, but this is definitely a way to spend your time. There is also a group for the people staying at Birkeparken (the accommodation I stayed at) and thanks to my mentor I was informed about the events there. These include several parties as well as a free dinner at the start of the semester. I can highly recommend at least the latter because it is shortly after the start of the semester and you notice which people in your courses live close to you.

But before I close with my best and worst experience I want to add a few more things to living in Odense that I found to be very helpful. First and foremost you will want to buy a bike. I am pretty much the last person you would expect to hear this from as I was determined not to get one and I had not used a bike in years before my stay and yet here we are. There are lots of reasons why this is true so let me list a few. For one they are highly practical as the city is not small enough that you can walk everywhere and with a bike you are not bound by bus times. For example I lived 7 km away from SDU which is not
something you can walk twice a day (because it would take you around three hours). Also the buses are really expensive, without a monthly ticket or something similar you would be paying more than three Euros one way. Additionally it is actually really safe for bikes, as there are bike roads absolutely everywhere and cars pay attention to cyclists. One note on cycling: You cannot turn left, you have to go straight, wait on the opposite side and go straight again. This lets you use the bike roads everywhere and always stay to the right of the cars. Also raising your hand is the signal for stopping. There is a used bike store close to the train station which does not have a website, in a street called Fjordsgade (not that I would recommend this store, it is probably better to get a bike from another student over Facebook if you have that option, but if you do not or you cannot find anyone to sell your bike before you leave it is an option).

Next, you can take a language course for which you can sign up at the start of the semester. I did do this but I cannot say I recommend doing so if you are only staying for a single semester as you do not gain a lot. It is a lot easier to just learn the numbers and a few useful words – like thank you, you’re welcome, or sorry – on your own. If you are staying longer and can take part in more than just the first course, it is probably a good idea to do so however.

The rest of the things are not as important, but here they are anyway. There are a lot of German teachers at SDU as well as a lot of German exchange students. This does not make it an ideal destination if you are trying to get away from German speakers. Lots of stores are open on Sundays. You can use your student card to get into university on any day, even on Sunday.

Now finally let me describe my best and worst experience. The worst one is easy to place, as it is pretty much the only bad experience I made. It concerns the accommodation and living with roommates. First of all it was rather dirty when I moved in, so I can only recommend going there a bit early so that you have a chance to get settled before the semester starts. My room itself was fine, but the common areas were messy. I later learned that you can complain when you move in though and if it actually is bad enough (and I am sure this would have qualified), they get it cleaned (at the expense of the previous tenant). This was unfortunate but not really terrible. The bad part of this experience was staying with roommates. We were all internationals, two PhD students and a bachelor student aside from me. But from what I can tell the only people actually cleaning the flat were the bachelor student and myself. We both did complain about it and it briefly got better after that, but this generally did not last very long. And frankly there is a point where it just becomes annoying to see food on the floor and knowing that, despite not being responsible for the mess, if you do not clean it up yourself, nobody will. That being said, I highly recommend what it says in the flyer you might or might not get when moving in: Make a cleaning schedule and see that people do their chores.

But enough of the bad experience, I want to end on the more prevailing part, namely a good experience. It is actually somewhat hard to classify the best one here so this is just one good experience. I already mentioned that I did not manage to meet a single unfriendly person during my stay and this is true. But it is actually even more than that. I am terrible at meeting new people and it takes me a long time to get to know someone, so I was expecting to have to do most of the assignments alone. This turned out to be false. With the orientation days you get to see a lot of the other exchange students and recognise them again in your courses. Additionally you are all in a somewhat similar situation: You are in a new city and have not really met anyone yet. As a result I actually had people to do exercises or study together with in all but one lecture. The last is simply due to the fact that I appear to have been the only exchange student there (making me feel slightly guilty because I was the only reason the lecture was not in Danish). And not just that, but you also spend time together outside of university.

Now for the detailed explanation of what needs to be done in preparation. After choosing SDU as the university I wanted to go to, I first had to write an application for the ERASMUS program. This was relatively uncomplicated and done mostly online. Most notably it involves a letter of motivation, a CV, uploading a few documents and filling out some forms. Afterwards I was contacted by SDU and I had to apply there as well. This application was a bit more
cumbersome, it obviously required the expected information such as name, what type of studies and contact information. However quite a bit of additional information was asked for. You needed to hand in, by which of course I mean scan and send in, your nomination as an ERASMUS student. This however was not a document we received before the application deadline and hence it was necessary to get it beforehand. Furthermore a scan of some sort of identification, ID or passport, was required as well as a grade transcript. The last mandatory document in general was a documentation of language skills, which however just required printing out a given form and getting it signed. The faculty of science requests an additional “detailed course description”, which requires to summarise (and translate) the syllabus of every lecture you have taken so far. As I was not sure what was needed here, I went through all lectures that appeared in the grade transcript, looked up their contents and translated that. Finally to complete the application, you had to select the courses you wanted to take during your stay. This also proved to be rather tricky as the information on which courses would actually be available that semester was nowhere to be found. I simply checked the courses offered in the previous autumn semester and picked the ones I wanted from there. This caused no problems as it seems the initial choice is preliminary and you can feel free to choose as many courses as you like, exceeding the 30 credits required.

After sending in this application there was a break for quite some time and then I was contacted by SDU again. This mail contained information about my selected courses, telling me which ones would take place, which ones would not, possible lectures to replace the ones that were not offered and how many credits I still needed to reach the 30. So basically a very helpful and detailed description of ones options. From this I now picked the lectures I wanted to attend, which exceeded the 30 credits by 5 and after ensuring them that this was intentional, I got the lectures I chose. I do not know if you are allowed to take less than 30, but it is at least expected that you take a full semester worth of courses. Next I filled out the learning agreement (before mobility) and got it signed, sent a scanned version to SDU, got a signed scan back just a day later and uploaded it as well. The next thing needed to be uploaded was the letter of acceptance, which I did not receive until rather late (after the grant agreement if I am not mistaken, but I managed to do it eventually). Speaking of the grant agreement, that needed to be read, signed and handed in after which a language test followed (for the course language, not the country, so English and not Danish). You can however sign up for the Danish language course if you do well enough on the test, an option which I took but not one I turned out to use a lot. The reason for this is that I really tried the online course, but never got past the first lesson. That one was still relatively easy to follow and understand, but the system used, in which people speak the language to you and you only get pictures to symbolise the meaning, did not work for me. I could no longer understand what they were saying in the second part, much less spell it and I gave up.

This completes the application for university, leaving accommodation. Luckily this is really simple, as the university contacts you and you can simply say that you want them to supply you with a place to live and they will make you an offer. I first got a mail with a non-binding offer for a room in Birkeparken, which I accepted. This one can be declined and you will get another offer, but that offer is, to the best of my knowledge, binding. As I said, I accepted the room in Birkeparken and it was fine, it is however relatively far from everywhere (7 km to university, 5 km to the main station and over 1 km to the closest grocery store). Hence it creates quite a lot of travel time, I spent around an hour a day biking to get to university and back. There is also the alternative of taking the bus, but it is rather expensive (24 DKK one way, which is more than 3 Euros without a monthly card). It is also apparently not considered to be the safest place to live by the locals though I cannot say I noticed why.

All in all, I really enjoyed my semester in Denmark and I can highly recommend studying at SDU. It is relatively simple to apply – it might be a bit of work but both sides, home and receiving, were incredibly helpful when I had questions. You are guaranteed an accommodation – as long as you sign up in time and do not decline it. But you might want to consider not choosing Birkeparken as your accommodation and hope for something closer to university and you really want to make a Facebook account beforehand if you do not have one. But overall it will simply be a great experience.