

WHAT DOES DENMARK HAVE IN COMMON WITH WALLONIA?

BY NINA MÖGER
BENGTTSSON

Unlike its Western European peers, Denmark has no national strategy for studies abroad. The following think piece by the vice president of Danish Students Abroad – a close partner organization of Danes Worldwide in our education policy efforts – calls on Danish politicians to take action to rectify the situation.

Now aside from their small size and prevalence of forests, it may be hard to think of many points of comparison between Denmark and Wallonia. But we do in fact share one more thing. In 2019 Denmark and Wallonia are the only two places in Western Europe that lack a strategy for internationalisation of higher education.

Think about that once more. While every country with which we tend to compare ourselves has developed a national strategy for international education, we must look east - all the way to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus - to find company for our approach.

And there is good reason for this. Despite rising nationalism, we truly live in a time defined by hyper global markets and border-crossing issues. Several multinational companies have outpaced the GDP of Denmark by pursuing the potential of global integration. Digital media have allowed us to be in constant contact with peers across the world. And finally, the most pressing

issues of our time no longer stop to wait at a border crossing. Tax havens, climate change and immigration are global by nature.

Navigating this interconnected world requires international experience and intercultural understanding. Our Western European neighbours have long understood this. So have Danish businesses. According to a study by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science, more than 70% of Danish companies today consider international outlook to be an important factor when recruiting employees. And more than half predict that international experience will grow to have an even larger impact on hiring in the future. International experience – regardless of course or country – provides students with a series of universal competencies that come from the very journey away from the familiar.

But Danish students lose out when political ambitions fall behind. Today, Danish students do not benefit from the same opportunities as their fellow Europeans. Due to slow process and political neglect, students with dreams of studying abroad face the same problems today as they have for years. Securing funding and obtaining loans remain a constant struggle. A rigid system of merit impedes educational flexibility. And a lack of information and counselling about the possibilities means that many give up before even trying.

The consequence is that fewer Danish students venture into international education. The EU Commission found that while the EU22 averages at 4.3% of national students completing a full education abroad, Denmark lags behind at 1.8%.

Rather than comparing ourselves to Wallonia, neighbouring countries may be used as examples to follow. Germany has set a national target for 2020 – one year from now – to enable 50% of all students in higher education to study abroad. And they have not left it at mere talk. In 2017, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) was given a budget of 500 million euros for scholarships and exchange funding.

In Norway, the government has assumed a similar ambitious attitude towards international education. For years, they have provided public funding for the Association for Norwegian

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Students Abroad who counsel, advertise and lobby on the topic of foreign exchange at several levels of education. Norway also provides vastly better funding for students who choose to pursue a full-time bachelor degree abroad. Not surprisingly, the Norwegian share of students venturing abroad far exceeds the European average.

It is clear that solutions are not hard to come by.

The truth is, that the Danish obstacles have grown out of political inertia. The first step is thus to push for an ambitious set of targets for outgoing mobility that politicians can be held accountable for fulfilling. The second step is to follow through with funding.

A lack of ambition not only harms Danish students who dream of studying abroad – it also harms the very core of Denmark's global position. As Barack Obama pointed out during his visit to Kolding last year, Denmark may be a small country, but we have consistently punched above our weight internationally. This has only been possible by maintaining a consistent and proactive orientation outward, demanding a seat at the table.

However, despite our significant reliance on global economic and political cooperation, we stand without a plan for equipping Danish youth with the necessary international experience to navigate in the international arena of the future.

It is about time we change that. ●

NINA MÖGER BENGTTSSON is vice president of Danish Students Abroad (DSA). She has lived and studied in Denmark, Singapore and the US. Danish Students Abroad is a volunteer-based organisation who work to make it easier for Danish students to go abroad and return home. They do so through free counselling, political representation and community building. More info: www.dsabroad.dk



DANES WORLDWIDE og **DSA** collaborate to advise Danish students preparing to study abroad, as well as Danish students abroad who want to study at a Danish university or other higher education program in Denmark. Contact student counselor Maria Graversgaard Jørgensen: dsa@danes.dk / +45 3332 0913.

A joint membership of Danes Worldwide and DSA costs DKK 150 annually. For more information, visit www.danes.dk/maerkesager/uddannelse

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