

destination

# Studying in Scandinavia

Opportunities for university study in the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland are relatively unknown among international students and agents but the region offers many advantages, according to course providers. **BETHAN NORRIS** finds out more.

Universities in Scandinavia are usually sidelined in the global education market with many international students having little idea of what the area has to offer or what life is like there. Sofi Dougherty, International Relations Officer at Högskolan Dalarna in Sweden says, "We hear from students studying with us that they are convinced that if only potential students knew what it was like to study in Sweden, many more students would choose to come here."

Lack of information about study opportunities within Scandinavia is commonly cited as a reason for few international enrolments at universities in the region, with Sirpa Holmström from HAAGA-University of Applied Sciences in Finland, pointing out, "[T]here is a lack of student awareness. Scandinavia is considered distant and cold." However, there are signs that, as the global education market matures, international students are increasingly looking away from the traditional study destinations of the USA and UK to those that have certain price or lifestyle advantages.

One of the major benefits for international students of studying in Scandinavia is the fact that, for now at least, tuition is free for all students. Many undergraduate and graduate courses are taught in English and higher education in this region has a high reputation worldwide. It can be difficult to see why international students would choose to go anywhere else. Maija Salminen, International Coordinator at Tampere Polytechnic – University of Applied Sciences in Finland, says, "Degree students come to Finland because of the high standard of education and the diversity of English degree programmes offered." She adds, "Most degree students in our institution have had previous contacts in Finland."

While international students can study on an academic programme in English, fitting in with the local lifestyle and interacting with local people is also relatively easy for foreigners, according to international student coordinators. Dougherty asserts that most people in Scandinavia can speak or try to speak English and adds, "Scandinavia offers proximity to nature and a low population density. Our countries are often clean, neat, well-organised and safe."

As well as a high standard of living, safety is a key issue for many international students who may be travelling away from home for the first time. Anne-Mari Alikoski from the University of Kuopio in Finland emphasises that "Finland is a very safe country". For example, she adds, "It is safe for women to walk alone outside even after dark."

One of Scandinavia's key selling points, its lack of tuition fees for international students, looks set to change soon as discussions are currently ongoing regarding the introduction of fees for non-European Union (EU) students. In Denmark, non-EU students have had to pay tuition fees from September 2006 and universities in Finland, Sweden and Norway

look set to follow suit in the next few years. Michael Cooper, Director of International Relations at Karlstads University in Denmark, says this is bound to have an effect on whether universities think it is worth their while to actively recruit students from overseas. "It will be up to the individual universities to decide whether they wish to go down the international student recruitment pathway," he says. "There are those that are keen on this and others that are very doubtful."

Trine Sand from the University of Copenhagen in Denmark, where inbound exchange students have increased by around 20-to-30 per cent each year over the past three years, says that the introduction of tuition fees is likely to adversely affect enrolments from non-exchange students, although she also cites "lack of awareness, the perception that living costs are high [in Denmark] and the perception that students have to be able to speak Danish to study and live in Denmark", as other factors that are likely to continue to keep international enrolments down in the immediate future.

While Scandinavia could become a less cheap option, tuition fees and living costs are likely to remain competitive when compared with other destinations such as the UK, however, where one year of an undergraduate degree course can cost up to £15,000 (US\$28,642). At the University of Aarhus in Denmark, for example, tuition fees for the 2006 year ranged from €9,100 (US\$11,600) to €15,300 (US\$19,500).

There is evidence that Scandinavian universities are increasingly focusing on international marketing strategies as they recognise the



advantages they have for international students, and this will continue with the added financial incentive that tuition fees would bring. Alikoski in Finland asserts that international recruitment strategies have so been confined to "mainly advertising on the Internet and some fairs" but adds, "recruitment has been quite minimal, but is increasing rapidly".

Existing student markets for Scandinavian universities are spread across the world with many universities so far relying on word-of-mouth to recruit international students. Alikoski says that Russian, Estonian, German and Chinese have been the university's largest student

nationalities over the last five years and remain stable. Meanwhile, Dougherty in Sweden reports that strong student markets for them include Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, China and Nigeria. She notes, "An argument we hear

is that it is considered easier to get admission to a university within Scandinavia compared with a university in the UK/USA. This may be due to the relatively high number of universities in a small population."

Most universities agree, however, that increased promotional activities are needed if Scandinavia is to really take advantage of its export education market in the future. The area's location and slight air of mystery is both an attraction and a disadvantage, says Dougherty. ■

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Country	Cost of living per month (US\$)	Work permit required?	No. of hours able to work term time (non-EU)
Sweden	€600 (US\$765)	no	unlimited
Finland	€700 (US\$893)	no	20
Norway	8,000 NOK (US\$1,226)	yes	20
Denmark	€645-800 (US\$823-1,020)	yes	15