

DAAD INVITE - International Networking for Virtually Improved Teacher Education

An educationally valuable semester abroad between university slides and chaotic classrooms.



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Anna and Leila, two prospective special needs teachers, have been given a unique opportunity for their semester abroad. As part of the INVITE project, they have the opportunity to explore the education systems in Denmark and gain valuable experience. In an exclusive interview, the two report on their experiences at Danish schools and the University of Copenhagen and compare them with the conditions in Germany. They also talk about the insights they have gained for their future work as teachers and what they want to do differently in Germany.

INVITE Team: Hello Anna and Leila! How long have you been in Denmark? Was the beginning overwhelming?

Anna: Hello, we've been here for over a month now. Leila and I have very similar schedules, so we can always coordinate and are not on your own.

Leila: Preparing for the semester abroad was very stressful and sometimes overwhelming. But once we arrived here, we quickly fell in love with Denmark and especially Copenhagen. Friendships develop very quickly, too.

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INVITE Team: So you have been well received?

Leila: Yes, totally! The other international students are all open-minded and there are lots of opportunities from the university to get in touch with other students and lecturers outside of lectures.

Anna: Danish students have also approached us after lectures and then sat down with us in a café and were really interested. We thought they were being paid for it, as nice as they all are. 😊

INVITE Team: Did you expect such a friendly welcome?

Leila: To be honest, no. We were told that the Danes are closed-minded. But the opposite is the case.

Anna: We also celebrated with them directly and tomorrow, for example, we're going to a museum with some of them.

INVITE Team: Is the museum visit part of a lecture?

Leila: No, it's voluntary. But the students all really enjoy it. In general, the Danes are somehow much more positive about studying than the students at home. They make you want to study straight away.

INVITE Team: Are there any other differences to studying in Germany?

Anna: Everything seems much more approachable. We address the lecturers by their first names and they meet us at a more personal level!

Leila: During the break the other day, a lecturer asked us what we were having for lunch and had a nice chat with us. That's a way of interaction that we weren't used to. They are interested in our private lives, which built up trust very quickly. The lecture periods are also much longer and you have to get used to it first.

Anna: It was very exhausting at the beginning, but initiative is fully appreciated and there is a lot of very good feedback.

Leila: However, this renders a little bit too much of a school-feeling. We are constantly reminded to hand in assignments. There is also a lot of emphasis on group work and cooperation. Sometimes it's too much for me, and the working atmosphere is generally completely different.

Anna: That's what I'm saying as well!



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Leila: There's even a "Playlab" here with a slide, magic sand, costumes and other gadgets. The philosophy is that you have to feel like a child again in order to get new ideas for your lessons.

INVITE Team: Alongside your studies, you are also doing an internship at a school, right?

Anna: That's right. One of our reasons for going abroad with the INVITE project was also to combine theory and practice. The Scandinavian system is constantly referred to as the best school system in the world in our studies at home. But very few students really get to experience what that means.

Leila: On our first day, we walked into a 4th grade classroom and none of the students were sitting in their seats. Some were sitting in the corner, others were standing around a table, others were sitting on the desks, they all had no shoes on - it looked pretty wild. But that was okay!

INVITE Team: What will you take away from your experiences so far for your future career?

Leila: The closeness between teachers and pupils. Physical contact, like in Denmark, should be less forbidden and we should meet the children at a more personal level. That doesn't mean we should let them get away with everything, but we as teachers should be more reflective. Is eating during lessons really bad or have we simply learned this at some point without justification and now demand it from our students?

Anna: I think so too. We shouldn't try to be the infallible teacher, but rather take a reflective approach to ourselves and our students. You also feel much more comfortable in the classroom when you take your shoes off. It's not all dirty, you can just sit on the floor and everything feels more informal.

INVITE Team: What would you wish for from the German education system?

Leila: First of all, the Danes don't have any more money than we do. They also have a shortage of teachers. But they still manage better.

Anna: More flexibility in the timetable and a more open curriculum. The focus should be more on teaching support rather than teaching management.

Leila: Exactly. There should be a lot of freedom and participation for students. The Danes also have guidelines like our curricula, but the path to them is not as rigidly prescribed as ours.

INVITE Team: What advice can you give to students who are still unsure whether they want to spend a semester abroad or not?

Leila: As future teachers, we want to encourage our students' imagination and creativity. If we want to become a teacher who takes oneself seriously, then we should also take this step out of our comfort zone.

Anna: Many students don't have the privilege of speaking the native language of the country they live in like we do. This change of perspective with Denmark is a very important experience that can be very valuable.

Leila: During my semester-long internship, I realized that I wasn't ready to stand in front of a class. I didn't feel like an established person yet. Through this semester abroad, I'm not only getting to know myself better, but also my personality as a teacher.

Anna: Just recently, we had a great moment after an exhausting day where we were able to teach two children something despite a huge language barrier and the sense of achievement showed us both that teaching is the right career for us. It would have been difficult for us to have this kind of experience in Germany.

INVITE Team: Thank you very much! We wish you lots of great experiences in Denmark.

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