Jarvis Suslowicz – Travelling Scholarship Report 2018

Introduction

For the summer of 2018, I was lucky to be one of 500 out of a pool of 2500+ applicants accepted into the University of Oslo International Summer School to study Intermediate Norwegian and Norwegian Social Studies for a six-week semester on location in Oslo, Norway. I was luckier still to be awarded a Travelling Scholarship by the University of Leicester for purposes of academic travel to the amount of £500. In this report I will detail my reasoning, experiences and outcomes of this trip, also accounting my use of my awarded scholarship funds.

As a Human Geography student at Leicester, we are encouraged to be more aware of the world around us. I’m also aware of increasing anglo-centrism occurring with globalisation and as such, the importance of language as an expression and assertion of culture. I’ve studied language on a casual basis for years as a reaction to failing GCSE German many years prior from coping with undiagnosed social anxiety/autism. Norwegian Bokmål has always been a language I’ve enjoyed and, despite having just over 5 million native speakers, benefits from being close to both Danish and slightly further but still intelligible: Swedish. As a key figure in global governance, Norwegian can have use in a professional setting. I also chose Norwegian social studies from personal interest in Sami-Norwegian relations and Scandinavian minority cultures. Upon completion of my course, I flew to Tromsø for a weekend to learn more about urban arctic life and Sami history.

Risks and Challenges

Despite this being an international solo trip, I considered the travel risks associated to be quite low. I have been travelling to Norway alone for nearly 4 years and the route is relatively simple. Though healthcare is inexpensive in Norway, my course fee included health insurance and despite being a non-EU country, EHICs are also valid. Room and board were also included in the price, stationed at Blindern Studenterhjem dorm, adjacent to the UiO Blindern campus.

Journey

After researching costs with checked baggage and flights to Tromsø, the cheapest and most convenient option was with Norwegian Air Shuttle from Gatwick Airport. All other travel was done by train.

University of Oslo Life

The student body at the UiO International Summer School was very diverse. The ISS provides full and partial scholarships to students from disadvantaged regions, and we were actively encouraged to socialise with people from differing cultures to share knowledge experiences. This was one of my favourite benefits from ISS as it’s rare to be with such a diverse group for an extended period of time. At the opening ceremony, our guests (including the Mayor of Oslo) expressed the importance and benefits of this for both attendees and Oslo as a global city.
Blindern Studenterhjem was a perfect centre for this experience. The layout of buildings and rooms fostered social interaction, with the nights being short at the latitude coupled with season.

**Excursion**

The course fee also included an excursion with a few different options, all with the intent of giving students an experience of Norwegian culture and/or nature outside Oslo. I signed up for a two-day hike through mountains in Jotunheimen Nasjonalpark on our first weekend. The area is famous for its’ awe-inspiring natural beauty, particularly the glacial lakes Gjende (which has a type of biscuit named after it, so you know it’s important) and Bygdin (below). Due to relying on public transport for travel, I had never ventured further than the cities in Norway before, so this was a new experience.

**Norwegian Course**

The official name of my Norwegian language course was Intensive Intermediate Norwegian – Level II, and it was exactly that. It aimed to get students from an A2 to B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in only 6 weeks! Classes were from 10am until 1pm each day, accounting for just under 60 hours of teaching in total (accounting for exams). We were expected to have either completed the A1-A2 class or taught ourselves to this level prior, I did the latter. My class consisted mostly of people who had already immigrated to Norway who wanted to improve their language skills in a formal setting. The rest, apart from me, had immediate intentions of migrating to Norway. It was interesting getting to know people’s reasoning for moving to Oslo, predominately for work and in other cases, for love. Some were married to Norwegians and others to other immigrants who had moved to Norway prior for work. I cannot reinforce enough the cultural diversity of the people I shared this experience with. Much of the B1 Norwegian Bokmål syllabus centred around learning to talk about employment, culture and politics so we all had opportunities to contribute knowledge about our experiences in our home countries.

Assessment was via a speaking exam (muntlig eksamen) and a written exam (skriftlig eksamen), accounting for 50% each. Speaking exams have never been easy for me, however my teachers and the admin staff at UiO were incredibly accommodating and reassuring.

**Norwegian Social Studies**

After the first lecture, I expected the Norsk Samfunnskunnskap course to be nationalistic and self-congratulatory. Thankfully it ended up not being just an overview of Norwegian culture and attitudes, but was highly critical and encouraged students to be also. We had guest lecturers from relevant fields for political aspects, including Dr Kristian Åtland from the Norwegian Defence
Research Establishment for our teaching on security challenges in the Arctic and relations with Russia post-annexation of Crimea.

An exam for credit was optional for this class, which I opted to complete. To qualify, we had to write an essay analysing our experiences with Norwegian culture with reference from teaching and reading. I chose to write about the Norwegian relationship with nature and how this reflects in the distribution and quality of urban green spaces in and around Oslo. This gave an excuse to explore areas of Oslomarka, the hugely popular forest surrounding Oslo, accessible via multiple T-bane lines and carefully managed for accessibility. Oslo is Europe’s Green Capital for 2019 and it’s easy to see why. Access to nature is a huge part of Norwegian culture, evidenced through national stereotypes (Norwegians are “born with skis on their feet”) and public policy (Allemannsretten – the right to roam) while having few issues ‘conquering’ nature with large scale infrastructure projects: Norway is particularly famous for their tunnels.

International Cultural Evening

It was emphasised continuously throughout our 6 weeks by staff that the International Cultural Evening would be the best part of the summer school. I wasn’t convinced, but I was absolutely proved wrong. The cultural evening was a collaborative work from students, consisting at the beginning of cultural sharing through food and education at individual booths at the Norwegian Students Society, following through to performances in the auditorium. The performances were incredibly varied; including traditional dances, music, spoken word and poetry. Above all, it was inherently political. I learnt about the occupation of the Kingdom of Hawai’i by the USA from native Hawai’ians and the assassination of Brazilian politician and activist, Marielle Franco earlier this year. I’m incredibly grateful for the opportunity to hear from so many voices that night.

Exams and Cultural Differences

Towards the end of the summer school, I was lucky enough to get to experience the Norwegian healthcare system via contraction of a double ear infection from swimming in too many beautiful
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lakes. While being a painful annoyance, it was interesting experiencing foreign healthcare for the first time and observing the differences. While the NHS is mainly free at the point of access, primary care in Norway requires a premium and prescription costs are not regulated in the same way they are in the UK. I was able to complete my written exams, although I could barely hear the listening portion of my language exam!

Exams were all completed through Inspera, a computer-based program. There was also less of an emphasis on timing than what I’m used to through UK exams. I qualified for 25% extra time but came nowhere near to needing it! It was much less anxiety-inducing, certainly, and I can see it as the future for examinations back home too.

**Tromsø**

After saying goodbyes, I headed back to Oslo Gardermoen airport and flew north to Tromsø. I’ve always wanted to visit the arctic and Tromsø is definitely one of the most accessible ways to do so. Though not within official Sápmi borders, Tromsø is the closest urban hub for Northern Sami and as such, an important area for younger Sami who feel the pull of both Norwegian and Sami identities. My social studies class concentrated a lot on the relationship between the Norwegian state and indigenous populations throughout history. In global governance, Norway is proud of having no colonial history, however, the state’s policies of cultural eradication are reminiscent of those practiced in Native American territory by European settler colonists. I visited several museums in Tromsø with intention of building on teaching about Sami culture in a contemporary context and I was not disappointed. Exhibitions showed the continuing imperialist attitude of the Norwegian state in regards to resources in Sápmi territory. Post-colonial? Maybe not.

**Grades and Conclusions**

I applied to the University of Oslo International Summer School for purely academic reasons but truly got so much more from it than that. I graduated from the ISS with a C (Good) in Norwegian language and an A (Excellent) in my social studies class for 25 ECTS credits, equivalent to 50 credits at Leicester.

I cannot recommend a summer school program in a foreign country enough, especially to those unconvinced to do an Erasmus placement during their undergraduate course. Getting a formal education in a language has provided a basis for further independent study, I was able to ask questions about the nuances of Norwegian language and finally understand all the grammar which may not have been possible without guided study. We also received many good recommendations for resources to continue learning.

My Travelling Scholarship was used entirely towards the cost of the course/room/board with the remainder paid out of pocket. Thank you to the University of Leicester for the opportunity to have this experience, and I hope to attend another summer school program in 2019!