

The year of working Danishly*

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About 18 months ago our family took the decision to uproot ourselves and move to Denmark so that I could join the Royal Danish Library to take up a role at Roskilde University Library. This decision was both personal and professional: my husband is Danish, we were keen to give our children the experience of living in their “other home”, and Brexit had dampened our enthusiasm to stay in the UK. I’d had 10 really enjoyable and rewarding years at the University of Sussex in different roles, but

felt ready for a new challenge, and when the job at Roskilde came up, it seemed like the perfect opportunity for us all to make a fresh start.

So, a year in, has it all been *hygge* and fabulous Danish design? It’s been incredibly demanding, even before COVID-19 made an appearance. I’ve never been further out my comfort zone, getting to grips with language, a new working culture and yes, we’re talking libraries, so another set of unfathomable acronyms. After packing up two removal vans, we’ve moved house twice, started new jobs and a new school (a whole topic in itself – I think I’ve been the one who has most missed the uniforms and discipline of the British school system). I’ve had many reflections over the past 12 months on the similarities and differences between Denmark and the UK, some specific to Higher Education libraries and scholarly communications, some to differences in the Danish/UK workplace, and of course others related to the different approaches taken by the UK and Danish governments regarding their management of COVID-19.

Language

During my interview for the role at Roskilde, I made a rash promise that I’d speak Danish from day one. Despite feeling fairly secure with the language in social situations when I

started, I can't overstate the enormity of the challenge of upgrading that to a professional level of competency: trying to build relationships with my team, contribute something remotely meaningful in a meeting, or have a discussion about the library budget. Even though Danes do speak English extremely competently, they certainly don't do so out of choice, and it would be incredibly difficult to be here in a management or leadership role without the language. Danish language is known to be one of the important elements of Danish culture, and although English is widely used in parts of the academic community, it's less the case in administrative and support services. Universities are becoming increasingly international (I cringed when I heard a university senior executive describe Brexit as an opportunity for Denmark in terms of student recruitment), and although university meetings are by default held in Danish, there only has to be one attendee that doesn't understand the language for the entire meeting to flip to English. A meeting where 95% of attendees are speaking their second language is a very different animal – that's something we never have to contend with in the UK.

The language challenges don't only exist in the workplace, but also within the research context. For a University such as Roskilde which prioritises impact within the local community, there's a tension between the need to communicate research to the right audience and the national research evaluation system, which rewards high-impact (and consequently English-language) journals. Most Danish-language textbook publishing is handled by a small number of publishers, who are very content with their existing business models, selling print copies direct to students or libraries. Sound familiar? In stark contrast to the UK, most students can afford to purchase books, so there's no incentive for publishers to offer sustainable ebook models suitable for libraries. This became painfully clear when COVID-19 forced both libraries and bookshops to shut. Suddenly access to print was cut off, and libraries were unable to source electronic versions of print books. It wasn't study space that was most needed, but access to content, and the first step in our reopening process was to begin to offer a PDF scan-and-send service for book chapters.

Collaboration

Denmark is a small country, and therefore collaboration, both on a national and international level, is very important. Libraries are a primary example: Roskilde University Library is a partnership between the University and the Royal Danish Library, Denmark's national library (of Black Diamond fame). Of Denmark's eight university Libraries, six of them have some kind of agreement with the Royal Danish Library for delivery of services. The benefit of all this collaboration is a really effective setup – one library system and content team for several universities, we share expertise and the costs of skills development. For example, one of our current strategic initiatives is to develop and support services and projects across three university libraries to support the Open Science agenda at Copenhagen, Aarhus and Roskilde universities. There are also many challenges – the Royal Library is enormous, with over 900 employees in different sites across the country, and all with different user groups with competing needs. Shared infrastructure creates many efficiencies, but it limits our ability to be agile and flexible, which was very clear as we started to reopen our services after COVID-19 in May – we managed it, but it took an enormous amount of hard work and cooperation.

Working culture

It's very hard to talk about the differences in working culture without going into lengthy details about *Janteloven* and Danish values and society in general, but I'll try. Work is a very

important part of Danish culture, and the welfare system is set up so that as many people can be at work as possible. Childcare is excellent, state-provided and inexpensive, and the welfare system includes “flexible jobs”, tailored, subsidized roles for individuals unable to work under standard conditions, for example due to disability. This makes for a diverse and supportive workplace. Coming to work is seen as important for an individual’s wellbeing, and a huge amount of time, energy and money is invested in *arbejdspladsmiljøet* or the “working environment”, both physical and mental. An equivalent of the UK’s Health and Safety but on steroids, the working environment in Denmark is something that is nurtured in a partnership between management, workplace representatives and employees. Issues such as noise, stress and bullying are prioritised and addressed. Roskilde University has recently developed a set of principles for workplace wellbeing for staff that includes the right to have meaningful work, a good work-life balance and to be involved in decision-making. Staff development budgets are prioritized, and not the first thing to be cut at the first sniff of spending cuts. It's important that everyone enjoys their work and is fulfilled by it - the Danes even have a word *arbejdslyst* which roughly translates as "enjoying yourself at work" which everyone aspires to. And *hygge* is possible in the workplace (but not usually when we’re actually working).

There is little or no hierarchy (or at least not officially). The Danish word for employees translates as "co-workers" and structures are incredibly flat. In Roskilde University Library, we have 20 staff who work in self-organised teams, and refer directly to me. When I first arrived in Denmark, I really missed the pyramidal organisational structures we have in the UK that provide a map of where everyone fits in the organisation, who does what, and who reports to whom. Rather than using hierarchy to delegate responsibility or make decisions, in Denmark there's a reliance on a really good knowledge of internal strengths, politics and just how things work. The structure and rules-of-play, provided by role descriptions graded according to levels of responsibility and a national pay scale, don't exist in Denmark. Instead job descriptions are a combination of work responsibilities and personal attributes and skills that the roleholder brings with them, reflecting an underlying idea that a role is a combination of the two parts. Situation-based structured job interview questions from the UK have been replaced by long informal discussions getting to know candidates, with a greater emphasis on team fit and personality. There are many unwritten rules in the workplace – how decisions are made, who’s actually responsible for what – which hierarchies and structures made so much more straightforward in the UK.

A majority of Danes, staff and managers alike, are members of a trade union, based on their training or education. Salaries and terms of employment are negotiated in collective agreements between the unions and the employers every few years, meaning that there are no strikes here (if there are delays with reaching an agreement, then workers can be "locked out" of the workplace without pay until an agreement is reached). The culture of collaboration between the various unions and management in Denmark is very important part of working culture and decision making.

Students

Another consequence of the Danish welfare system is student wellbeing. There are no tuition fees and students living away from home receive a grant of GBP 750 per month that they can top up with a student loan. That means that in general students aren’t in poverty, they’re not trying to fund their way through university by combining full-time study with other jobs, they don’t need to use library resources at all hours to fit around their personal situation, and they

have fewer mental health issues. Although the project-based approach to learning at Roskilde University means that the library building is very popular with students, most of them do have spaces that they can study at home. We're not seen as a refuge, as many UK HE libraries can be.

Like it or not, the marketization of UK Higher Education and introduction of student fees has led to a paradigm shift in how libraries engage with their students. Libraries have transformed their services over the past 15 or so years to be so much more student-focused – 24 hour opening, scrapping overdue fines, co-creation of services, even the extraordinary lengths that I've seen HE libraries go to get hold of content for their students during COVID-19. UK students demand excellent service and expect to be listened to and involved. That has led to some impressive student-library partnerships – design of new services and initiatives like decolonizing the curriculum – as well as a focus on really good customer service. Ownership of both the library building and its services has shifted along the library-student continuum to become a shared enterprise. It's a subtle but important transfer of power and in the UK has altered the relationship between the library and its users. Is it the library's building or theirs? Co-creation is only possible if there's a sense of co-ownership. From my experience so far, that's not quite where we are in Denmark: liaison with students tends to take place after a service has been developed, or as an afterthought, and they're not central player in service development.

I've reflected on the a dichotomy between the emphasis on students in the UK on one hand, and on employees and the workplace in Denmark on the other. Are they mutually exclusive, or can we take the best from both approaches to make our libraries even better – places where both students and staff can thrive?

These are just a few observations from the past year. There have been many more, both personal and professional. In many ways, Denmark does live up to its stereotype: life is good, but expensive; lots of people cycle; the pastries are amazing; and the winter is very grey and exceedingly long. Are we pleased we made the move? COVID-19 has certainly made the relatively short distance to the UK feel much further away, and we never dreamt that we'd have to wait so long before seeing family and friends again. But we're not packing up those removal vans again anytime soon.

* with apologies for unashamedly adapting the title of Helen Russell's book, *The year of Living Danishly: uncovering the secrets of the world's happiest country*, which I can thoroughly recommend as an excellent introduction to the country of *hygge* and *arbejdslyst*.