

Student Experience Report, University of Stavanger, Norway.

Summer semester 2024

Since the exchange semester to UiS is mandatory part of the EMMIR program, it means the planning process is relatively hassle-free. The paperwork and logistics were quite straight forward, and since all the colleagues in my program were moving to Norway, we did everything together, reminding each other not to forget about things like submitting housing requests and making appointments at the police station upon arrival.

Before the semester started, instead of going home, I took the opportunity to travel around as much as I could. When my last SAS flight was finally descending over Stavanger, I watched the fjords glow in the long golden hours of the Nordic winter. The view—especially the clouds, gently stretching upwards across the sky like ambivalent feathery wings—instantly washed away the exhaustion of my month-long trip and instilled in me a renewed excitement of setting eyes on a landscape for the first time.

Arriving at a hospital-ward-like room in the dead of winter, however, was less romantic. Compared to the views outside, the lukewarm light fixture in the room felt stale. But with a kitchenette and bathroom to myself, there was not much to complain. The biggest problem was that I mistrusted the DHL guy in Oldenburg (“Five days,” he stretched out one hand confidently when I inquired about shipment time) and had only scheduled my luggage shipment accordingly. So while my things were stuck in Hamburg processing center for more than another week, I had neither decorations to cover the wall, nor proper duvet to cover myself. Luckily, the solutions were easily navigable in Ikea, secondhand shops, and the omnipotent Stavanger Free Stuff Facebook group—and bit by bit, this quiet little white cube of a room started to feel like my own, and eventually became an anchor amidst a nomadic life.

The more annoying part of arrival was the administrative one. The residence permit application process for a third country national involves a hefty fee and what felt like an indefinite wait. It ended up taking two months before I received my residence card, but during the wait it was impossible to plan for the visa required for my next module. So even as I started to feel at “home” and developed routines, part of me felt like I still hadn’t landed.

The semester schedule at University of Stavanger is a bit Frankenstein-like: one module

(Emigration and Immigration: A Northern European Perspective) that ran consistently throughout the semester, punctured by three week-long intensive elective modules taught by professors from our partner institution in Slovenia (mine were on gender and migration, critical literacy, and controversies in multiculturalism). Each module required a 4,000-word research paper as output, except for the Northern European one in which you can produce a podcast or video instead.

This structure made the academic experience both exciting and frustration—there were multiple chances to switch gear to the stimulation of a brand new, very intriguing topic; but at the same time, it felt like each module had to wrap up before it had the chance to develop into more depth. One of the highlights of the courses for me was the “my migration history” presentations for the Northern European Perspective module, where each student talked about their own migration and intercultural experiences. Many heartfelt stories emerged during these presentations, away from the big words and theoretical debates that sometimes risk ringing a bit empty. They also allowed me to see how each of us approached the question of “what constitutes a migration history” differently, which is intriguing for my own interest in studying narratives.

Our cohort grew a lot tighter throughout the semester as we organized many hangouts and potlucks together, and sought each other’s company as we explored a new country. We hiked the famous Preikestolen, visited the little islands around Stavanger, and complained over and over about the prices of drinks and groceries. I also started to make friends outside of EMMIR: at events in and out of the university, in the gym changing room, or during a fire alarm...Compared to Germany, it was more expensive to travel around Europe from Stavanger, but that actually made us explore our surroundings more—I even got to try cross country skiing for the first time with a free lesson. The landscapes surrounding Stavanger is simply breathtaking. Even when you’re just taking the bus to the clinic, or you hop on the bus in the wrong direction from the airport...it really doesn’t take long for you to be so absorbed by the views outside the window that you’re completely taken out of the daily troubles as a student, even just briefly.

I would say this semester did give me new perspectives on the subject I was studying in a new geographical area, just as I had hoped for when I set out for Norway. But unexpectedly, it also became a journey of self-discovery, to see how I, having just lived in one of the largest cities in the world, can deal with the silence of a Norwegian town; to feel the throbbing impatience and uncertainty as long nights slowly grow into long days; to experience, once again, what it’s like to make a “home” and then leave it behind—but then always taking a piece of it with me.