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Comment: Denmark - don't throw away your future



Photo: Courtesy of the author

Alex Berger, a recent graduate from the University of Copenhagen

An open question to my Danish friends – do you truly want to emulate Arizona? Because that's the direction you're heading. In this featured comment, a recent graduate of the University of Copenhagen offers his talking points on 'The Study Progress Reform'

by Alex Berger

Fresh off of a recent recession and in the midst of its aftermath, Denmark is facing all of the usual debates about its educational system one would expect. Some are complaining about the tax rate they pay and looking to scapegoat any source they can. As usual, one of the easy targets is education, and education funding has fallen squarely in their cross hairs. While it is, perhaps, not terribly typical for Denmark, it is a process I'm intimately familiar with from my time in the USA and especially Arizona.

A major reason I was drawn to Denmark is because of its focus on education. Even though I wasn't eligible to take part, the fact that Danish students attend University for free and receive a monthly stipend of between USD 700-1,000 to survive on is incredibly attractive. That level of commitment to education goes a long ways towards explaining why Denmark, despite its near complete lack of natural resources, its rugged climate, extremely difficult language, and small population is an intellectual, professional and economic powerhouse. Denmark surpasses many of its counterparts which are 5, 10 or even 20 times its size.

Unfortunately, it's painfully clear to me that recent 'reforms' proposed to the Danish education system, many of which are heavily inspired by the ideological approaches which have deeply harmed American higher education over the last two decades, will have far more severe ramifications for Denmark. Everything in Denmark is based upon one commodity: The country's intellectual capital. In areas such as green design, architecture, or Copenhagen Suborbitals, it's obvious. Where it is less obvious is the country's push for wind energy, biomedical, high tech, etc. which all require a highly educated population with a sound intellectual foundation. Without it, the whole system falls apart. The high quality of life, standard of living, and disproportionately

influential role Denmark enjoys on the world stage is all just a few poorly thought-out moves away from ruin – and let's face it, Danes have no interest in losing their extremely comfortable first-world status and lifestyle.

Factions of business leaders, bureaucrats, and media representatives have fallen over each other in recent months in an effort to exploit students and the Danish education system. They have all the usual arguments – they are taking too long, they are wasting everyone's money, they are lazy, they need increased incentives, and of course, “Why should I have to pay for their education?”.

The tone and delivery varies slightly from year-to-year, country-to-country, but at the end of the day it's always the same arguments. It's the same nonsense that was used in Arizona to slash and divert the budgets of public schools, all so that those same funds could be wasted on small pet projects, or go to independent charter schools. Schools which, it turned out, bypassed the regulations, transparency, and oversight present in the public schools and which have served as a portal for the insertion of young earth creationism, politically convenient rewrites of history, economic and political material, social status warfare, and tragically incomplete curriculum.

At the end of the day, that was all done through four basic claims:

1. Individuals should be able to dictate where their tax money is spent because taxes are too high and we must cut waste.
2. Poor educational performance and/or graduation speed is the fault of insufficient rules, tests, and due to bad teachers/lazy students.
3. We already give the education system more than it needs. If they really need more money, why are they building new buildings (etc.)? They just need the efficiency of free-market mechanisms and business-minded leadership.
4. For-profit corporations and corporate models can do a better job of running our universities.

Sound familiar?

What has resulted is the widespread increase in tuition (often double or triple-digit increases) at public universities in the US which have had to compensate for deep cuts in the government support they receive. Plus, significant attempts to decrease research grants/funds, and a general contraction in the availability of funding support for American students.

As Denmark looks to the US for guidance and brings in “educational consultants”, it is worth pausing and asking if the green pastures and blue skies those consultants have pitched have any basis in reality. Keep in mind that as of 2011 one out of every three dollars borrowed by Americans (not including home mortgages) went to debt tied to higher education. The average Bachelors graduate in the US in 2013 graduated with roughly USD 35,200 in debt. As staggering as that may seem to Danes, it's actually quite low as I have friends who pursued a Master's (a rarity in the US due to the cost), and/or went on for PhDs and who have between USD 150,000 and USD 250,000 in accrued debt.

The result is that students have been forced to abandoned areas of the humanities and liberal

arts – areas fundamental to an educated population and healthy society – in favor of higher paying majors. Others have foregone or radically shortened their college programs altogether at significant societal cost to the US's well-being. All the while, the added responsibilities students take on to survive (part-time jobs, reduced credit hour loads, etc.) mean that they face slower graduation times, and have to spend more time in the system. Problems confounded by reduced budgets at the universities which lead to lower levels of guidance, reduced class availability, worse teacher : student ratios, and other similar problems.

What this means for Denmark

Is there ample room for improvement within the Danish system? Absolutely. Do Danish students have it easy compared to some other countries? In some ways. Do they take longer than they should to graduate? Perhaps. Could some reform be beneficial? Always.

However, the way to bring about these positive changes isn't to draw from broken systems and to seek to penalize and scapegoat students.

What the system needs is more funding, not less. What students need is a better organized administrative infrastructure that has information more readily available and which takes a more active and involved role in helping them progress through their education.

Do you really want students to graduate faster?

Then make sure that they can take a course, regardless of semester. Time and time again students end up forced to delay because a course has pre-requisites that are only offered once per year.

Do we want students to progress more quickly through their program? Then we must start by providing full time, professional academic advisers that have an intimate knowledge of the system (not students in student jobs who typically hold the position for less than 2 years and spend half of that time learning the system). Further, have those advisers follow up with their portfolio of students twice a semester as a mandatory part of the student's program. These advisers should also be available throughout the week, not just on a limited once or twice a week schedule.

Do we want improved performance from the Danish students? Then we must decrease course size. It's amazing how much better the quality of education is when you've got a teacher ratio (especially at a Master's level) of 1:10 or 1:15 vs. 1:30 or 1:90.

Want students to do better at navigating the bureaucracy of their program? Try speeding up and cleaning up the university bureaucracy and a culture that leads to constantly delayed deadlines, multi-month delays in announcements, decisions, and results processing.

Let's be clear: student performance is a symptom of the problem. It is not the source.

Taking a little longer is OK

The reality is that while private interests lash out and blame students for being lazy, what they neglect is the internship culture that has arisen where Danish companies realize tens of

thousands of hours of free or cheap labor per year via internship programs which often consume the entirety of Danish student's semester course load. Even worse these programs have now become virtually mandatory for students seeking a rapid transition from educational to professional life.

As a recent MA grad I had a rather rigid 2-year deadline due to my tuition waiver. I had to forego the option of pursuing an academic internship. Why? Because the internship, which was worth 15 ECTS points, took up the entirety of a semester. Which meant, that for me to take it, I'd have been forced to add on a fifth semester to my program. For the thousands of students that pursue these types of academic internships, and as a result are delayed at least a semester, it's not their fault. In fact, it is a strength of the system.

Further, that culture of low paid or free academic internships is not possible without either A) students taking on excessive amounts of debt as is occurring in the US or B) receiving SU financial support to offset their living costs.

Another area where that extra SU money has paid off big for Denmark, is the local start-up culture. It's amazing how different the start-up culture and lifestyle here is compared to what my friends go through in the USA. True, the sheer risk of failure and large financial debts my friends rack up may serve as a motivator that Danish students lack. Yet, they also have the advantage of having a revenue source while studying that allows them to explore their passions, ideas, creativity, and to take risks which would otherwise have catastrophic financial ramifications in the US (in turn crippling many of America's best and brightest for years). These student's creativity is powering both Denmark's innovation and creative cultures.

Recent discussion has focused on how few Danish students are studying abroad and the need for increased globalization. A problem I have been working to explore and solve. A lot of that comes from more flexible university schedules and a system that provides windows and opportunities through which students can take time to explore the world and experience it without harming their academic progress.

The Danish system already pigeonholes students into fairly narrow educational specializations. Exposure to other coursework is limited when compared to systems such as those in the United States. This in turn means that for Danes who are trying to decide where to focus their education, they have far less flexibility in exploring what the university has to offer before locking into a set track. The more that their options are limited, the more they are cornered into a limited education. That, unfortunately, is to the detriment of everyone those students will come into contact with. Just imagine if more economists took anthropology and history courses. Or if philosophy students bolstered their education with a course in evolutionary biology.

So, Denmark, do you want real solutions that will strengthen Denmark's future? Or a few extra kroner off your taxes and the self affirmation that comes from pointing a finger at students and scolding them for their imagined delinquency?

You've got something special here. Something that should serve as a model for the rest of the world and which embodies the strengths of a civilized culture that values intellectual progress. Please, don't throw that away because of a few talking points.

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