

Student Experience Report – Spring Semester 2021 – University of Stavanger, Norway

During the Spring of 2021 I wrote my master thesis at the University of Stavanger (UiS). I had already done a previous exchange in Stavanger the year before, during the Spring of 2020. During the year, I had become more and more interested in Sámi Studies, which led me to the decision to write my thesis about a Sámi related topic. As I was going to live and do fieldwork in the Norwegian part of Sápmi, and chose a supervisor from UiS, it made sense for me to be registered at UiS for another semester. My master's program coordinators kindly agreed and I did not have to apply for a position, but was instead able to enroll with the kind help of the administrative staff at the University of Stavanger. They basically renewed my earlier registration, a very quick and smooth process.

My previous semester at UiS had been a bit out of the ordinary due to the outbreak of the corona pandemic, and already at the start of my second exchange it became clear that the coronavirus would have a sustained impact on my experiences this Spring. Due to the rise of the Delta variant, Norway announced in January that it was closing its borders for basically everyone except those with a Norwegian passport or permanent residence – meaning that instead of travelling from Amsterdam to Stavanger by train in a week's time, I had to get on a plane to Oslo, take the train to Stavanger from there, and quarantine at a friend's house as my rental contract had not yet started. Tight lockdown measures, though I didn't know that at the time of travel, would remain in place until early May. This severely limited my opportunities to socialize, travel, exercise, and made writing my thesis – already a very individual task by nature – an extremely solitary and isolating experience.

Different from what you would typically expect, I did not live in Stavanger during the semester, but in Bodø, a small city in the Northern part of Norway also known as Sápmi, the territory of the Indigenous Sámi people. During my previous semester, I had travelled around Northern Norway and fallen in love with this rough, cold, and sparsely populated part of the country. A Norwegian friend of mine was moving to Bodø for an internship, and as I would spend this semester writing and doing fieldwork in the North, I decided to join her. We travelled by train from Stavanger to Bodø, which takes an astonishing 30 hours, since you have to travel via the East of the country as the West, with all its fjords and islands, is not connected by rail. The trains also go very slow, because they don't go often, and hence stop in every tiny town on the way up. They are, however, well-connected, minimizing layover times; they offer a student discount; and the further you get up North, the more impressive the views become.

I don't know how relevant it is to talk a lot about Bodø itself, since it is unlikely that any other exchange student at UiS will be able to spend their semester in this Arctic town. Moreover, the city became the epicenter of the Delta virus outbreak in Norway, so the local lockdown measures prevented me from getting to know the city and its people. Either way, Bodø is not really a student city. There is a small and pretty recently established university in Mørkved, 10 kilometers outside of Bodø. But most teenagers who finish high school around the area move down South to study, work, or simply live in a bigger city. When walking around the city outside of Summer/Christmas break, you rarely see anyone between the ages of 18-30. The fact that no bars/clubs were opened and all (student) associations had paused their social gatherings also didn't help getting in touch with the few young people that are there. Even the library was closed for a long time. During this time, I mostly studied from home, cooked nice meals with my friend, and enjoyed the outdoors by going on skiing/hiking and cabin trips. The ferry to

Lofoten only takes 3 hours from Bodø and is free for passengers by foot. The pictures pasted below were taken on these trips.

As infection rates lowered towards the Summer, I was finally able to move around the city more. I really enjoyed going climbing at the top-notch gym in Mørkved, and met some students through the climbing club and the local DNT Ung (an outdoors association for young people). I also went out for fieldwork, however, and towards the end of June I was preparing for my move to Bergen (a city in Southern Norway where I decided to settle post-study). So in hindsight, I never really got to settle or build up a network in Bodø; exchanges are short after all.

If I need to translate my experience into a recommendation for future students I would probably say: be very mindful about going on exchange to an isolated location during the current pandemic. Bodø might be a different story from Stavanger (which is bigger, has a milder climate, and way more of a student life), but still small in comparison to other European cities and Norwegians are known for being hard to connect with – let alone in a pandemic. I have been on exchange before, I have even been on exchange in Norway before, but my experience in Bodø last semester was, though beautiful in many ways (the nature is incredible, and me and my Norwegian friend became very close), very different from my earlier experiences. It was actually quite lonely. Norway and the North are very special, but please think to yourself whether there is any way that you could possibly postpone your exchange, or whether you are in the mind space to spend a lot of time alone/in nature.



