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Live and work in North Denmark

Expatriate Survey 2012

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1. Introduction

This survey was carried out in connection with the project *The Global Periphery* by EDGE, Centre for Equality, Diversity and Gender at Aalborg University, in collaboration with project *Velkomstcentre - Live and Work in North Denmark*. The purpose of the survey is to examine the background, needs and satisfaction levels among the users of the centers.

Making the change from home to abroad can be a complicated process for both immigrants and potential employers, and it is the goal of project *Velkomstcentre* to help ease the process of recruiting, integrating, informing and assisting foreign workers in North Denmark. According to The Expat Study 2010 (Oxford Research A/S and The Copenhagen Post, 2010: 19), only 5% of Expats in Denmark settle in North Denmark, making it the region that receives the fewest Expats in the country. As a result, one of the purposes of this survey is to understand what is needed in terms of both branding and services in order to attract and retain competent, foreign workers in North Denmark.

2. Method

This report is based on an online survey carried out in the period of June 1st to August 1st 2012. The survey was distributed to all members of the mailing list at project *Velkomstcentre*, which during said period covered 101 subscribers. In addition, the survey was made available from the project homepage for *The Global Periphery* project at Aalborg University. The survey covers five themes: 1) Background information, 2) level of education and job situation, 3) level of education and job situation for any partner/spouse, 4) perceptions of North Denmark and 5) closing remarks.

While large parts of the data consists of quantitative information (numbers and percentages), a number of questions also provided opportunities for informants to write longer comments. These more qualitative aspects of the dataset will be used throughout the report to expand and underline certain aspects of the survey.¹

The first part of the survey gathers information about the background, everyday life and job situation of the Expat-workers. They were asked about their civil status; which municipality they are residing in; whether they have children under the age of 18, and whether any partner or children they may have, have moved with them to North Denmark. Questions regarding the respondent's education, qualifications, job situation and the municipality he/she is working in, follow. Similar questions are asked about any partners or spouses.

The following, more detailed part of the survey consists of questions regarding the respondent's impressions of the region; the factors that influenced their decision to move here; whether they feel at home in the region, and what changes might make them feel more comfortable here. Furthermore, they are asked about factors that might make them leave the region – and factors that in this case might make them change their mind and stay.

¹ When referencing these longer comments, we reproduce them verbatim from entrances in the survey, without altering grammar etc. However, in a few instances we have found it necessary to explain more idiomatic expressions in square brackets inside such quotes.

Finally, some practical information is gathered – for instance regarding whether the respondent would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Such interviews might serve to gain more detailed and qualitative data that might offer insights into any areas that the quantitative data cannot cover, leaving open the possibility to conduct a more in-depth qualitative study at a later stage.

The online survey was anonymous and voluntary, and it was distributed to the users of *Velkomstcentre* via their mailing list. 72 respondents filled out the questionnaire, some in full (61 persons) and some only partially (the remaining 11 persons). Both complete and partial responses are used in the analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Background information

The respondents of the survey were approximately half male and half female, with a slight majority of males (54.2%). Almost all were between 20 and 50 years of age, and had typically moved to North Denmark after 2006. 80% of the informants had moved directly to North Denmark from their home country, and of those who had worked outside their home country *before* moving to North Denmark, most had spent more than 6 years working or looking for work in other countries within the EU. This means that there are a number of Expats living in North Denmark who are quite experienced at working outside their country of origin.

3.1.2 Belonging

While almost all the Expats now lived in Aalborg Municipality, their countries of origin varied widely, and included 29 countries in total – among others India, Syria, France, USA, Bangladesh, the UK, Russia and a number of African countries. A fairly high number – roughly 2/3 - of respondents came from countries outside the EU.

When investing time and energy in attracting and potentially educating foreign workers, an important issue is whether or not they intend or can be persuaded to stay in the country long enough to – so to speak – recoup the investment. In order to gain an idea of the scope of this issue, the Expats in this survey were asked if they intended to remain in the region. 33% of the respondents answered, that they were definitely planning on staying, 22% that they were planning on leaving, while almost half (45%) answered that they didn't know yet. The factors influencing these decisions and doubts are dealt with in more detail below.

3.1.3 Residency and civil status

When asked what influenced their choice of where in the region to live, many listed Aalborg University as a specific reason for choosing Aalborg Municipality, others that they needed to live close to either their own or their spouse's job. The fact that Aalborg is the largest city in the area – with for instance the best public

transport system – also figured as a prominent reason. Among the secondary reasons were cheap accommodations or housing and being close to schools, sports facilities or shopping opportunities.

About 80% of the respondents were married or in a relationship, and 36% had children under the age of 18, and most of these now lived with their partner and children in North Denmark. Some had brought their families with them; some had only met their partners and had children after moving to North Denmark. Hence, 24% now had a Danish partner/spouse. For those whose partner and/or children had stayed behind in their home country, the reasons were mainly listed as having to do with the children's education back home. Consideration for family and children was also one of the major reasons listed as to why respondents might leave North Denmark.

3.1.4 Education and job situation

The respondents were generally very well-educated²: 82% had an education level of university degree or higher; the same went for 87% of their partners or spouses, which makes it further noteworthy that the main problem identified in the survey was finding jobs for partners or spouses. Roughly 1 in 3 of both respondents and spouses had undergone further education since moving to North Denmark, mainly either basic Danish language training³ or – somewhat at the other end of the scale – a university degree. Only one person mentioned internal training within the company he/she was employed by, which might suggest that the employers show little interest in investing in their foreign employees in terms of furthering their education or upgrading their qualifications. The respondents were split fairly evenly between being unemployed (38.8%), employed temporarily (23.9%) and employed permanently (37.3%). Almost all current employment for respondents and spouses alike was located in Aalborg Municipality.

Those with jobs were mostly employed in positions that matched their education and skills (meaning mostly jobs that required an academic degree, like doctors, engineers and university staff), whereas the unemployed ones were looking for jobs in fields ranging from cleaning and waiting tables to management positions and software development - and a few were looking for jobs outside their field of training or below their educational level.

For spouses, however, the job situation looked bleaker: In spite of the majority having a university or PhD degree, 52% were unemployed – and almost half of the respondents who were considering leaving the country listed the job situation of their partner as a reason to leave. According to The Expat Study 2010 (Oxford Research A/S and The Copenhagen Post, 2010: 41), extra problems in relation to the employment

² This seems to contradict the findings of the consultancy report produced by Valeur A/S (2011), which found a high percentage of unskilled Expat laborers in the service-, hotel- and industrial fields. The respondents in this study consisted of the companies employing the Expats, as opposed to the Expat respondents themselves who partook in this survey. The biases inherent in these two different avenues may be responsible for the difference in findings, as the unskilled laborers may for instance not be as likely to establish contact with project *Velkomstcentre*, and hence may not figure on the emailing lists through which this survey was primarily distributed.

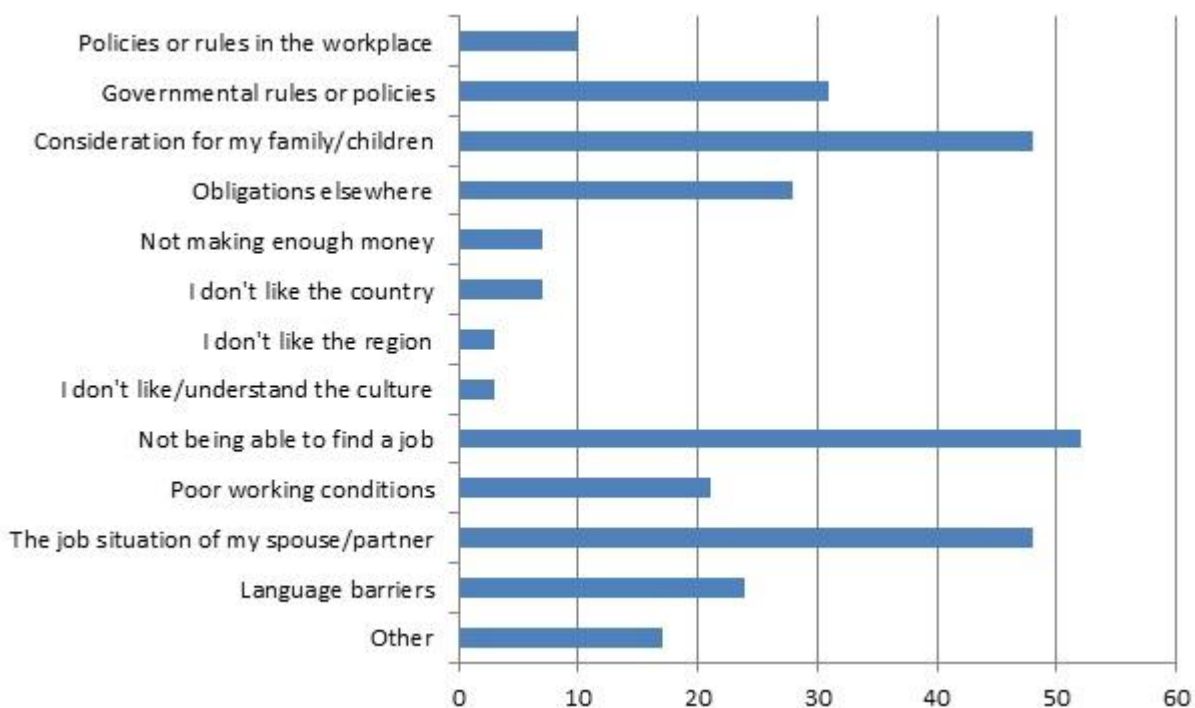
³ The issue of language was also a very important one when it came to measures that could be taken to make Expats feel more at home in North Denmark: The vast majority responded that learning the Danish language better would be key in making them feel more settled. This perhaps ties into another major desire among the respondents - namely making more friends among the Danes.

of the spouse arise because the Danish economy is based on dual income families, making it hard to sustain an average or higher standard of living on a single income. Similarly, a little over half of those who were unemployed themselves and considering leaving, answered that their own unemployment would be a factor in their decision. The inability to find jobs was, in other words, one of the main reasons for leaving the country; even after acquiring an education here. Of course, this particular survey does not reveal whether they planned to ever return to work in North Denmark again in the future, which may be a factor of interest in any further studies.

Apart from their own or their partner/spouse's unemployment, the only other reason, which an equally high number of respondents indicated as a reason to leave the region, was 'consideration for my family/children'. However, also 'Governmental or regional rules or policies' as well as language barriers were high on the list of reasons for considering leaving.

For the respondents who had *not* decided whether to leave or stay at the time of the survey, the results are listed below in table 1. This might give an idea of how to help the undecided Expats specifically to improve their conditions as much as possible, and make it both desirable and possible for them to stay.

Table 1: What might make you leave North Denmark? (Check up to 5 that you find most important)



It was possible for the respondents to check more than one box, therefore the percentages do not add up to 100%.

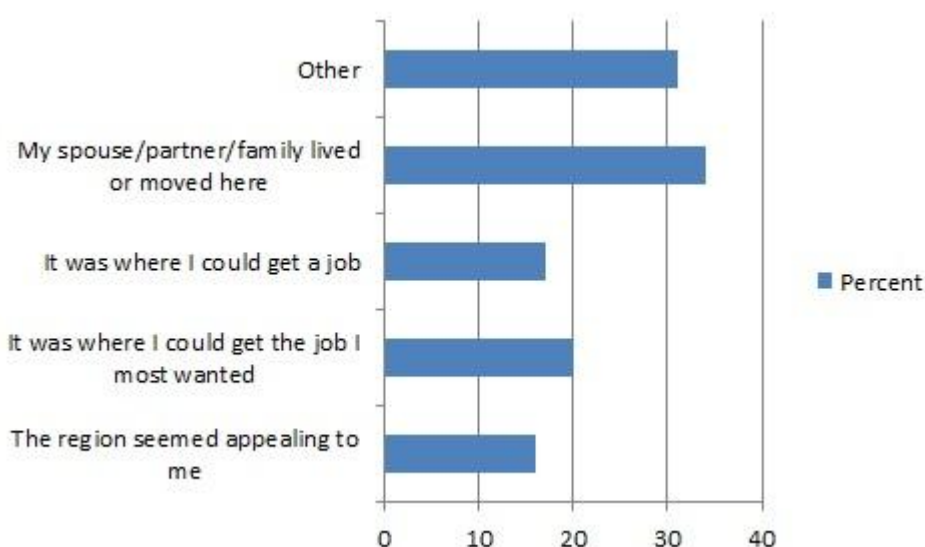
3.2 Choosing North Denmark

The respondents listed a wide variety of reasons to move to the region from abroad – the most prominent being the career opportunities (like higher wages and the possibilities for balancing work and family life), the chance to live with their family here, and acceptance into Aalborg University. The high hopes for better career opportunities seem somewhat ironic considering the high prevalence of Expats considering leaving the region or country due to the lack of the very same. In contrast, only very few point to possibilities for making more money and expanding their social and/or professional networking as reasons for moving to North Denmark.

The social security system had also appealed to several of the Expats, and influenced their decision to move to North Denmark, although a few expressed beliefs that the high level of social security might reduce individual responsibility too much. The impressions that the respondents' had *before* moving to the region were mostly positive, as the majority had perceived it to be a peaceful and safe place with friendly residents who valued equality, a place with beautiful nature, fairly good job opportunities, a high level of freedom and a political and social system that appealed to them and which would help them settle in and find their way. For example, one respondent stated the he/she expected to find a more easy-going and less bureaucratic working environment in comparison with the situation in his/her (unspecified) country of origin.

Many of these reasons are likely applicable to the choice of moving to Denmark in general. However, we also asked a number of questions in relation specifically to the choice of moving to the region of North Denmark. The responses are shown below.

Table 2: *Why did you choose to move specifically to North Denmark? (Check one or more boxes)*



It was possible for the respondents to check more than one box, therefore the percentages do not add up to 100%.

As will be noted from the table, the region in itself seems to carry less significance for the respondents compared to any other possible reasons for moving to North Denmark. When asked to elaborate on their reasons for choosing the region, the respondents noted for instance that *“It was possible to buy a house with land for a reasonable price – not the case in the uk”*. Others had been relocated from one branch of their company to another by their employer, or had, as mentioned above, decided to move to the region after being accepted into Aalborg University. In fact, Aalborg University itself appears to be a major pull factor in attracting foreign workers to the region.

One Expat commented specifically – and positively – on the residents of North Denmark:

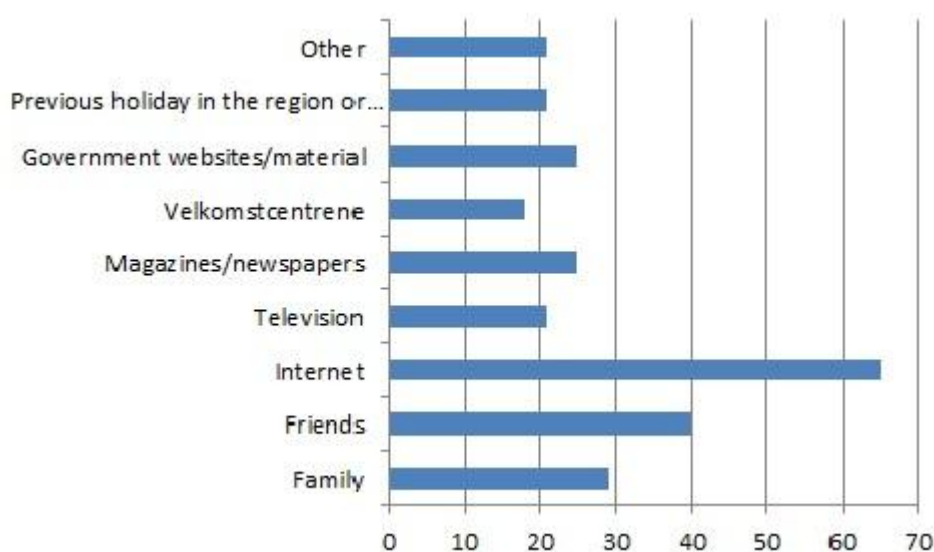
“The living standard of the middle class people match to my understanding for good quality of living. Most people are modest and patient. You like and respect each other. You love your country and work hard for its prosperity. I meet here every day many kind and happy people. And all this is one of the biggest treasures of Denmark!”

Most respondents’ families and friends had also been either positive or fairly neutral towards the idea of them moving to North Denmark. Only a very few – less than 5% - reported that they had received mainly negative reactions from others when planning to move to the region.

In regards to the idea of North Denmark as a peripheral region, the tendency seemed to be largely towards perceiving *all* of Denmark as peripheral, rather than just the northern parts in particular. Most respondents, however, also believe that the very concept of peripheral regions has become mostly obsolete in a globalized world with many technical possibilities for keeping in contact with friends and family left behind elsewhere.

The impressions of the region expressed by the Expats had come from a wide variety of sources, the main being the internet (65%). The rest were evenly divided between family/friends, television and magazines/newspapers, previous visits and government web sites.

Table 3: *Where did you get your initial impressions of the region from? (Check one or more boxes)*



It was possible for the respondents to check more than one box, therefore the percentages do not add up to 100%.

It is noteworthy that 17.5% answered that they had gotten their impressions from project *Velkomstcentre*. As the respondents had the option of checking more than one source, this relatively high number may be in combination with for instance impressions from the internet or TV, rather than the individual getting their impressions solely from *Velkomstcentre*. However, it still means that the way the center represents North Denmark, perhaps specifically online, has a fairly great impact on the impressions immigrants have of the region.

Most respondents had first heard about *Velkomstcentre* from either their private or professional network, through the International Citizen Service, or through sister organizations of *Velkomstcentre* like *Expat in Denmark* or *Work in Denmark*. 10% had heard of it from other, undefined places on the internet.

3.3 After moving to North Denmark

When asked whether they felt at home in North Denmark, 63% answered that they felt both a home and like newcomers, whereas 24% felt mostly at home in the region, leaving only 13% who mostly felt like newcomers. Half the respondents answered that after having lived in the region for some time, they would recommend moving to Denmark to others – and 1/3 would recommend North Denmark specifically. One respondent explained her appreciation for one aspect of Denmark in particular:

"I am very happy to live in very calm and clean country like Denmark. I would suggest to my family and friends that they should come to Denmark at least for a vacation to feel the freshness in the country. Me and my husband felt the same way as soon as we came out from the airplane (first time in the Copenhagen airport), we just can't express by words the fresh air (unpolluted) we breathed for the first time in our lifetime and we won't forget. We still remember that moment. My schoolmates share their thoughts (somehow it is the same as us). Everyone admired Denmark."

Another Expat expressed great satisfaction with the support he/she had received after coming to the region:

"Our experience has been far superior to my expectations, and there is far more investment in our wellbeing than anything I would have expected from N.Z. [New Zealand]"

However, in spite of almost all the respondents initially harboring positive impressions of North Denmark, around 25% of them then answered, that they had been somewhat disappointed in their expectations - either because of a lack of jobs, poor help and care for foreign workers, or regression in the region as a whole with regards to for instance poor infrastructure and the shutting down of schools. As mentioned above, the inability to find a job was one of the main reasons listed for why the respondents would want to leave the country or region again.

In fact, one respondent noted:

"[I chose it for] the working hours and work-life balance BUT now [I am] in doubt if I will be able to get a relevant academic work in NJ [North Denmark] – Not very visionary region/municipalities and very few opportunities for foreigners ..."

The impression that the region lacks vision, progress and job opportunities for foreigners may or may not be accurate, but either way seems to play a part in at least some respondents' decision whether or not to leave. This particular issue could certainly be of interest when planning any future branding of the region directed towards Expats.

Very few respondents (5%) answered that they had come in hopes of earning more money than before, and only 1/4 had been "fortune seekers" – moving to North Denmark without a job, hoping to find one after coming here. A higher number (app. 14%) however, *did* list "not making enough money" as a possible reason for leaving again, perhaps indicating that although most of the Expats had not initially believed they needed to earn a higher salary, some have none the less been taken aback by either their wages or the cost of living in North Denmark. As mentioned above, this may have to do with the dual income structure of Danish society, which might come as a surprise to Expats coming from countries with a single income structure. Several also mentioned the taxation system as one of the issues that had made a great impression on them after having moved to North Denmark, and one person mentioned that although he/she would like to go out more, the prices were prohibitive.

Similarly, only a few listed the opportunity for social and professional networking as a reason for moving to North Denmark, but when later asked what made them feel like a newcomer and what would make them feel more at home, 70% answered that they had a hard time making friends, and 60% that meeting more people socially would help them feel more at home. One respondent commented on the Danes' attitude towards foreigners:

"I think Danish people [...] are very closed to foreigners – we are only making trouble, therefore you are treating all foreigners in the same manner. [...] And I think if you are coming to Denmark for work and paying all taxes as the other people do – you and your family should be treated accordingly by immigration services."

Others felt that the system could be difficult to navigate:

"Integration in the working system was far more difficult than expected."

"I disagree with recommending to others from non-EU countries move to Denmark because the requirements for permanent residency are unbelievably strict, and do not allow for the choice of being a stay at home parent (must work 2.5 years to get enough points towards residency)."

Interestingly, one respondent commented very specifically on the improvements that he/she believed could be made to the system:

"It has been somewhat disappointing – I had expected that I after 1 ½ years in Denmark would be working – I have a lot of experience from the public sector (managerial) and have tried to approach the municipality suggesting the scheme "Oplærings og Integrationsstillinger" [...] but there was no interest at all to discuss or explore this. In for instance Cph. [Copenhagen] Municipality it is used for app. 30 positions a year. The Job consultants at the Job centers do not even know the scheme!!!"

These disappointments and perceived problems of some respondents were seemingly not particular to North Denmark, as only 3% of those who planned on – or thought about – leaving, answered that they

wanted to move to a different part of the country. In other words those who wanted to leave wanted to leave the country all together, not just the northern region. One of the few Expats who *did* plan on relocating to another part of Denmark noted:

"[...]I like North Denmark, its nature, its calmness and people are nice, but I feel I like other regions of Denmark more – because of the climate and I feel I will need to improve my skills in another bigger city with opportunity to study what I need (what is not here)"

3.4 How to improve the situation for the Expats

One of the main wishes among the Expats was clearly help finding jobs for both themselves and their spouses. Although 74% answered that they had had a job lined up in Denmark when they moved from their home country, nearly 40% were now unemployed – perhaps due to the trend of a relatively high number of Expats being employed in merely temporary positions, as only 37% had permanent employment at the time of the survey. The high number of respondents listing education as a reason for moving to North Denmark may also contribute to this statistic, as for instance a PhD-position is time limited, and may not result in permanent employment when completed.

More than half the spouses or partners were also unemployed, and so assistance with CVs and job searching, the Spouse Network North (which helps spouses of Expats to network and find jobs), and Danish language training were prominent on the lists of desired and relevant services among respondents.

Almost 65% of respondents wanted to learn the language better, and 68% responded that social networking focusing on learning about Danish culture and the local activities was particularly relevant. As pointed out earlier, language, culture and social life all intertwine, and difficulties with language and cultural insight may lead to problems making a connection with colleagues and new people – one of the major reasons respondents said they might want to leave the region again. Hence, one respondent noted that he/she might feel more at home in the region *"If Danes were better at putting their selves out there, most are quite reserved and keep to their own circles"*.

On a more directly practical note, roughly 1/3 felt they needed help with tax issues, while a more modest 15% felt that on-the-job mentoring arrangements were relevant to them. One concrete practical suggestion by a respondent was that the *Velkomstcentre* could perhaps cooperate more with the Language School and the job centers.



4. Conclusion

One of the findings from this survey of Expats active on the emailing list of project *Velkomstcentre – live and work in North Denmark* is that those who responded generally were between 20 and 50 years of age, and had typically moved to North Denmark after 2006, that very many were married or in a relationship, and that quite a few of these had a Danish partner/spouse. The answers given in the survey are likely to reflect this demographic profile in terms of the respondents reached through this survey. Further findings, include the following issues:

- Almost all the Expats lived in Aalborg Municipality, and their countries of origin varied widely – including 29 countries in total. Their primary motivation for moving to the region was the fact that their spouse/partner or family already lived here, and secondly job opportunities. Fewer people chose the region for its own sake. Within the region, Aalborg was by far the most attractive municipality in the eyes of the Expats, both in terms of job opportunities, but also due to its infrastructure, cultural life etc.
- 33% of the respondents answered that they were definitely planning on staying, 22% that they were planning on leaving, while almost half (45%) answered that they had yet to decide. This means there is considerable work to do for companies and project *Velkomstcentre* if the goal is to retain foreign workers who have already moved here.
- Many listed the size of Aalborg city or Aalborg University as a reason for choosing Aalborg Municipality, others that they needed to live close to either their own or their spouse's job. Aalborg University figures prominently as an individual pull factor for several respondents, which may be cause for consideration about how to prioritize collaboration between the university and project *Velkomstcentre*.
- The respondents were generally very well-educated: 82% had an education level of a university degree or higher; the same went for 87% of their partners or spouses. In comparison with previous research by Valeur (2011), this calls for consideration of whether it is perhaps a particular group amongst the Expats who subscribe to the emailing list; leaving aside another group of Expats who project *Velkomstcentre* do not reach through this communication channel.
- A fairly high number of respondents were employed only temporarily (23.9%), a situation which may be a common pattern for recruitment of foreign workers within certain sectors. This potentially calls for more in-depth investigation, because long-term plans for staying or leaving the country again may likely affect the perceived relevance of services offered to Expats. For example, intensive language training may be less likely to be perceived as a pressing issue for those who already know that they will only stay in the region short-term.
- Unemployment among spouses or partners and consideration for the family and/or children were the two major reasons why some Expats considered leaving the region again.
- Overall, the Expats had quite positive impressions of North Denmark before moving here, but 25% reported disappointment with the region after moving there – some felt the transfer was more difficult than expected in terms of bureaucracy, some were faced with unemployment and others found the Danes hard to befriend. Hence, 70% said they had a hard time making friends, and 60% answered that having more social contact would make them feel more at home.

- Although 74% answered that they had had a job lined up in Denmark when they moved from their home country, nearly 40% were now unemployed – perhaps due to the trend of a relatively high number of Expats being employed in temporary positions, as only 37% had permanent employment at the time of the survey.
- Assistance with CVs and job searching, the Spouse Network North (which helps spouses of Expats network and find jobs), and Danish language training were prominent on the lists of desired and relevant services among respondents.
- Roughly 1/3 felt they needed help with tax issues, while a more modest 15% felt that on-the-job mentoring arrangements were relevant to them. One concrete practical suggestion by a respondent was that the *Velkomstcentre* could perhaps cooperate more with the Language School and the job centers.

The overall impressions held by the Expats before moving to North Denmark seem to indicate that the region is well branded as far as foreign workers go: They believed it to be a place of career opportunities, peaceful surroundings, beautiful nature, friendly people and a system that would help them get settled and possibly find jobs. After arriving, however, some reported finding themselves disappointed: Integration – social, cultural and legal – felt unexpectedly difficult to many, and unemployment was a prominent problem for most of those who considered leaving the region again. Help finding jobs for both respondents and their spouses was high on the wish list of many. When considering the job situation of Expats, the fact that Denmark is a dual income culture is an important issue to bear in mind, as some may come to North Denmark with the expectation of maintaining a fairly high standard of living on one salary alone - which will not always be possible. Preparing the Expats for this potential problem (as well as helping their spouses find jobs) would likely be a major step towards keeping them in the region.

The language barrier was another large problem for most of the respondents. Many had already undergone language training after moving to North Denmark, but the vast majority still answered that learning the language more thoroughly would help them feel more at home. The desire among many respondents to meet more people and make more friends may be helped by both language training and learning more about – and partaking in – the Danish cultural life.



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