

IUW 2025 Group Report

International University Week in Porsgrunn, Norway

Sunday, 30th April 2025 – Friday, 04th Mai 2025

University of Applied Sciences, Emden/Leer

Faculty of Social Work and Health

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Preparation and Travel:

We are five social work students in the sixth semester. We started planning our trip in January. We decided that two people would take a flight. The remaining three intended to travel by land and sea.

After registering, we received a variety of information about the program, workshops, emergency advice, and a packing list. We were also given this and other information during an online meeting two weeks before the IUW.

The packing list was especially important for us three students, who decided to sleep in tents during our trip to Norway.

The three students' journey began with a train ride from Emden to Copenhagen. In Copenhagen, we stayed in a hotel overnight before continuing our journey by ferry. The ferry left Copenhagen at 3 p.m., and we arrived in Oslo by 10 a.m. the following day. From there, we took the train to Porsgrunn. We stayed in an apartment in the city for 2 nights and already experienced the nature around Porsgrunn. On Sunday, we took a bus to the university and arrived by 12 p.m.

The other two flew from Düsseldorf to Oslo. We took the train from Oslo to Porsgrunn and arrived around 7 p.m. the train from Emden to Düsseldorf Airport at 7 a.m. The day before, I had to prepare a small gift for the first program activity in Norway, consisting of traditional black bread with jam, tea and Klüntje (rock sugar), Haribo sweets, and pictures from Emden to give a first impression of our small coastal town.

We opted to fly, as the train and ferry alternative would have taken nearly a full extra day and wasn't much cheaper. Upon arriving in Oslo, we took a train to Porsgrunn and tried to catch up on some sleep, though the beautiful landscapes and wooden houses made that difficult.

The student assistant picked us up and took us to our hotel.

On the way back we decided to take a train to Oslo with other students from the IUW, as we made some good connections. After a six-hour stay in Oslo, three of the students took an overnight FlixBus to Copenhagen. From there on we continued our journey to Emden by train. The other two students stayed two more days in Oslo and took a flight back home.

Program and workshop:

The week was characterized by a varied program. On Sunday all the students arrived in Porsgrunn. On Monday morning, all students and teachers met at the campus, as they do every morning, to be welcomed and to discuss the day's schedule. After a welcoming speech, we attended an inspiring lecture about the challenges and excitement of cultural exchange. This motivated us to actively engage and meet new people. After this meeting, the IUW was officially opened. There was a lecture on the subject of culture, local ways of doing things, and how it is possible to deal with other cultures. After a lunch break, each university was presenting a table with food from their region or country. To represent our university, we printed out some pictures and served tea, black bread with sea buckthorn jam, and some candies and chocolate.

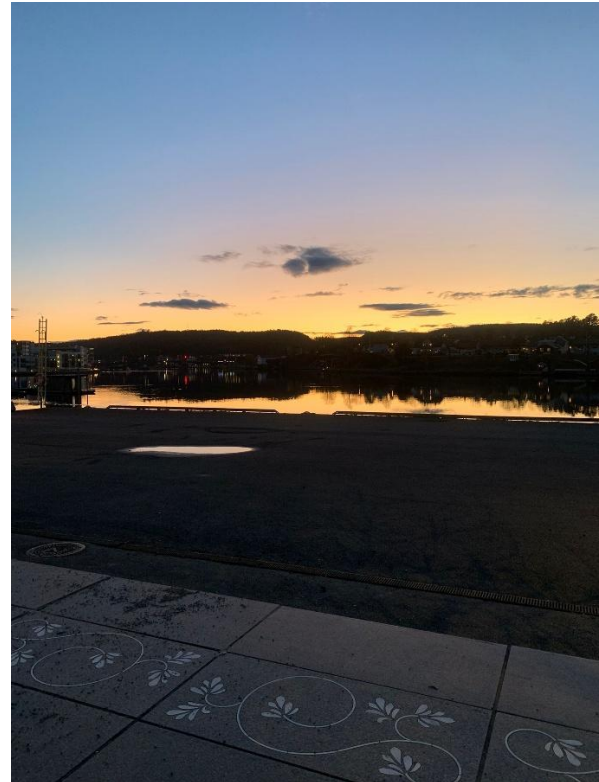
To get to know each other better and get some impressions about Porsgrunn and the nature around it.

On Tuesday we spend all day in a ... called Signo. Here are people living who are deaf and have some other disability. Being split into smaller groups again allowed us to meet participants we hadn't interacted with yet. We really appreciated that we spent the whole day there, as it offered a lot of insight and inspiration. During our stay we learned about the methods that the social workers are using in the school to teach sign language. Signo was built like a city. It has a church and a farm, which we also had the possibility to visit.

On Wednesday morning the first workshop block started. We had the option to choose one out of four workshops. In the workshop „What is it about music?“, a topic we hadn't explored much during my studies. It made me more aware of the power of music, and I was eager to share my experience during lunch in the cafeteria.

Walking through the hallways with others felt so natural, as if I had been studying there for years. The hospitality was ever-present, and the openness of the other participants created an atmosphere full of positive energy.

In the workshop „Me in a super diverse society,“ terms were first defined. This was followed by questions to which the participants had to answer yes or no. This led to many discussions, and one discussion that has stayed in our minds for a long time was the discussion on classification.



Another workshop was offered by a lecturer from Emden with the title "Laughter (Yoga) as a Tool in Social Work".

In the workshop "Active Learning in Social Work" ...

We spent the afternoon playing a game prepared by the Norwegian students. It was structured like a rally, and at the individual stations we had to answer questions about the countries the international students come from.

In the evening there was a party organized by the students. The international students celebrated together with the Norwegian students under the motto "après ski." The high alcohol consumption of the Norwegian students was very shocking for many of us. We, on the other hand, stuck to 1-2 drinks due to the high prices.

On Thursday we had a workshop block in the morning and in the afternoon.

- The following workshops were offered:
- Activities with old people
- Animal-assisted social work
- Practical Workshop on Social and Emotional Awareness
- Psychosocial Support for Caregivers in PICU
- Street smart Learning: Game Changing tools for youth workers

- Psychosocial needs of Sickle cell disease young adults
- Recovery is up to you

The organizers did a great job balancing workshops, excursions, and free time.

We joined a reflective workshop that turned out to be incredibly inspiring, thanks to the honest contributions from other participants.

By this point, speaking English had become much easier. I didn't have to think about sentence structure — it just flowed. This helped me engage more in the seminar discussions.

The warm weather that week was also a surprise. After one seminar, I spontaneously decided to take a quick (30-second) swim in the river near the hotel with two Finnish participants. The river had been frozen just two weeks earlier, making it a truly memorable experience.

We returned to campus for the formal dinner, where we received our certificates with applause. It was hard to believe everything would end the next day after such an amazing time.

The certificates of participation were also handed out at this event.

On the morning of the last day there was a reflection on Mentimeter, and some students had the opportunity to say something about the week. After that meeting, which was online together with St. Pölten, Nitra, and Bremen, it was time to say goodbye.



Personal experience:

Staying in a comfortable hotel, two of us were able to enjoy not only the excellently prepared food but also experience an open and warm community – both in the hotel and later in the tent camp, which impressed us with its strong community spirit despite the simpler conditions.

In terms of content, the week offered exciting insights into the Norwegian social work system. It was particularly striking that social work is better remunerated there than in many other countries. The professional focus also differs: in Norway, there is a stronger focus on childhood education, especially in dealing with attention deficit disorders (ADD) and similar issues.

Another highlight of the week were the well-attended workshops, which provided space for exchange, discussion, and professional development. The enthusiastic participation of the students demonstrated their great interest in international perspectives in social work.

While the surrounding area is scenically attractive, we quickly noticed that urban life seemed comparatively quiet and not very dynamic. The city was rather empty, especially in terms of young adults and students. There was hardly any sign of a lively student environment.

The cityscape was predominantly characterized by older people and young families with children. Leisure activities, cultural events, and meeting places, as one would expect to find in a typical student city, were hardly available. We got the impression that Porsgrunn serves more as a quiet place to live than as an active center of student life.

Some Norwegian participants confirmed this impression in conversations. They reported that they personally would not like to live in Porsgrunn permanently because they find the city “boring.” For many, it seemed as if the annual International Student Week was one of the few highlights that people really looked forward to throughout the year. While this event temporarily brought life to the city, it also highlighted how little else is offered to young people in everyday life. This impression was particularly surprising given that, according to some Norwegian students, even people from very remote regions of northern Norway move to Porsgrunn to study there. One would therefore expect that a certain student center or at least a lively university culture would have developed in such a city—but this did not seem to be the case.

During our stay, we also noticed that social work in Norway seems to receive more state funding overall than in Germany. Many social services are directly embedded in public

structures and better funded. In contrast to Germany, where most social work is carried out by independent organizations such as Diakonie or Caritas, responsibility in Norway often lies directly with state institutions. This not only enables more stable financing, but also ensures clearly defined responsibilities, for example in the area of child protection, which is centrally organized in Norway through the “Barnevernet.” Social recognition of the profession is also higher: social workers in Norway generally earn significantly more and work under better conditions. In addition, there is a strong focus on preventive work, especially with children, young people, and families. Many support services are low-threshold and integrated into educational institutions. Overall, this creates the impression of a more centrally controlled but also more efficient social system that clearly recognizes the importance of social work and supports it accordingly.

Wilderness experience:

Three of our students from Emden stayed the whole week in lavvu tents outside at the campus. The university in Porsgrunn provided us with everything we needed, including a sleeping bag, an inlet, and a sleeping mat. There were 11 other people sleeping in our tent. It was equipped with a stove in which we had to keep adding wood during the night. At the beginning it often went out, but in the second half of the week more and more people from the tent made sure that the stove stayed on at night. Despite the lack of space and sleeping close together, everyone got along very well. In the evening, we often spent a long time around the campfire and enjoyed the company. Some students were cold on the first few nights, but it got better over time as the temperature rose a little. This was between -2 and 3°C per night.

Reflection:

We enjoyed our stay during the IUW a lot. We are grateful for all the organizers and people who made our stay that comfortable and possible.

This week was very valuable for our personal and professional development. Through the exchange with the other students during the workshops and also in our free time, we were able to change our perspective and recognize other points of view.

We spent our last evening in a local pub with everyone who wanted to join, already making plans for the weekend in Oslo — many Spanish and Austrian participants were also extending their stay like us.

On our final morning, we enjoyed one last breakfast together, checked out of the hotel, and wrote a thank-you letter expressing our gratitude for the hospitality and experiences, which we handed in at the campus.

Then, it was time to board our train to the next adventure...

