

# Who needs Oxbridge? Meet the British students headed for Europe

As the UK becomes the most expensive place to study in Europe, thousands are opting for a free degree in Copenhagen or Plovdiv instead. Is it worth it?

**Rosie Ifould**

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**H**iroki Takano is not having a good day. “I lost my wallet, and then I realised I’d locked myself out of my apartment.” He sighs. Takano, 21, from Maidenhead in Berkshire, is at the end of his first week of lectures at university. But though this is the sort of thing that happens to freshers with alarming predictability, it’s a bit more complicated in his case. Takano isn’t in Leeds, or Manchester, or Durham, and he can’t just pop into the nearest branch of his bank. He’s in Copenhagen, roughly 600 miles from home.

Over the last fortnight, approximately half a million new undergraduates have embarked on student life at universities across the UK. They’ve unpacked their new kettles and their fresh-from-Ikea duvet covers. They’ve made a few friends (and, in many cases, already had their first regrettable romantic encounters). But, just as they begin to settle into lectures, thousands more British students like Hiroki Takano are already a month or so into their studies at universities across mainland Europe. They have swapped crowded halls of residence for Copenhagen flats, pub crawls for bonding forest campfires in Finland.

As tuition fees in the UK have risen, studying for a degree abroad has become an appealing alternative. So much so that, according to British Council research published earlier this year, up to a third of British students are considering overseas study. In February, Ucas, the organisation that handles applications to almost all British universities, announced it would consider adding European universities to admissions forms to reflect the growing number of courses taught in English across the continent. According to StudyPortals, a search platform for undergraduate and postgraduate courses, there is now a “critical mass” of English-taught programmes on offer across non-English-speaking Europe. Its database now lists around 1,800 such courses for undergraduates alone. You can choose psychology in Groningen, art management in Lithuania, even medicine in Plovdiv, a former industrial town in Bulgaria with a population of 340,000.

“I had been looking at Sofia, but then I saw Plovdiv,” says Sereen Fatima, 20, a third-year medical student from Manchester. “It’s such a pretty town - very small, very old, lots of cobbled streets. I like showing it off when my family come to visit.” Fatima had planned to study medicine in the UK, and she already had a couple of conditional offers, “but then I ended up missing the grades I needed by a very small margin.” So she started looking at alternatives, using an online consultancy company, Tutelage, to research universities across Europe. Her six-year course - all taught in English, with additional lessons in Bulgarian provided by the university - is recognised by the General Medical Council, and she doesn’t think her foreign qualification will stand in the way of getting jobs when she returns to the UK. “I’ve spoken to doctors about it, and they say that where you studied doesn’t affect your

employability. It's more about getting the right kinds of experience."

Arriving in Plovdiv for the first time was a bit of an adjustment, she says. "I remember getting lost a lot... And most people here don't speak English." Now, a lot of the time, she forgets she's in another country. "I don't really miss anything, apart from Nutella." She has just spent a couple of weeks on campus before the beginning of her third year, helping new British students to get settled, and she's already noticing differences between their experience and her own, two years ago. "When I first came here, property was very cheap. The apartment I share with two girls costs me around €150 [£110] a month. I don't think the students arriving now will be able to find anything for that amount."

For some, like Fatima, studying abroad is a way of keeping your career plans on track when A-level results don't go quite to plan, but the most common motivation for heading overseas seems to be money. With tuition fees of up to £9,000 a year, many students feel as if they're being priced out of higher education in the UK. A 2014 report commissioned by the Sutton Trust found that students in the UK will graduate with an average of £44,000 of debt. For some, the figures are even higher. "I had been offered a place at the Royal Veterinary College in London, but when I sat down and worked out roughly how much it was going to cost me, including my living costs, it came to over £100,000," Takano says. "That was pretty depressing. I looked into all sorts of alternatives. I even looked at joining the army because they help you out with the costs of university."

Takano is the first in his family to go to university, although he's currently trying to persuade his younger sister to join him in Denmark. He looked at courses in Germany, Slovakia and Amsterdam, before settling on Copenhagen, partly, he says, because his girlfriend is Danish - they met at an international youth camp six years ago - so he was already familiar with the country. Instead of veterinary medicine he's studying design, business and technology at KEA, the Copenhagen School of Design and Technology. It's a bit of a leap. Does he have any regrets? For a moment, he looks shocked. "No one's ever asked me that. I haven't really thought about it. No. I think I'm in the right place." He's extremely enthusiastic about his new home town ("I love the Assistens graveyard. I don't know if that sounds weird, but it's very cool. Søren Kierkegaard is buried there"), and he's already writing for the student newspaper.

Financially, he is much better off. His accommodation costs him around £230 a month, including bills. He's living off savings, with a bit of financial help from his parents. "I'm budgeting quite carefully, so right now I'm surviving on rye bread and tins of food. And I'm looking for a part-time job, because there's a scheme here where, if you get a job working 10-12 hours a week, then the government will give you £250 a month. You're also eligible for 0% interest loans." And, of course, his tuition is free.

If you're an EU citizen, you can receive a free university education - with all your lectures taught in English - in around half of all European countries, including Denmark, Austria, Norway and Greece. In other countries such as France, university fees are often as low as €180 a year. If you speak another language, countless more options open up. England, Wales and Northern Ireland now have the highest tuition fees in the European Union. With rents in cities such as London and Manchester soaring, it's also becoming one of the most expensive places to survive as a student. By contrast, Germany is one of the cheapest, and now has more universities ranked in the top 500 world's best than the UK, according to the global QS university rankings. A 2015 TES survey of the top 100 under 50 (institutions established in the last 50 years) ranked Maastricht University, where tuition fees start at €1,984 (£1,465) a year, at number six, higher than any UK university (Warwick was the

highest placed, at number nine). Looked at like this, studying abroad seems like the smart option.

The trend is still comparatively young. At present, Amsterdam Fashion Academy is the only EU university using the Ucas admissions service, but it seems likely that will change, and soon. A question many British employers may begin to ask is, will we lose a generation of bright, bilingual, adventurous graduates to their host cities? “One thing I’m set on is staying in Denmark after I’ve graduated, and not just because of my girlfriend,” Takano says. “I want to contribute back into this system. I don’t just want to get my free education and run.”

“The evidence from recent student surveys does suggest that paying tuition fees has made students more aware of the return they’re getting on their ‘investment’,” says Professor Rebecca Hughes, director of education at the British Council. While she’s confident many young people still want to invest in an education in the UK, students today are far more likely to ask, is this course really worth nearly £45,000 of debt? Will I get a job that’s worth it?

Jaska Clifford, 26, from Great Yarmouth, found that his first degree (music technology at Leeds Metropolitan University) didn’t leave him with many employment options. “I made a hasty decision to go into it and when I graduated there really wasn’t much work available, unless I wanted to move to London.” He ended up finding casual work in cafes and bars, as a kitchen porter in a large hotel and for the Royal Mail as a Christmas temp - nothing that made use of his qualifications. It’s a fairly familiar tale. Although the latest figures suggest that the job market for graduates has improved slightly, recent research from the Higher Education Statistics Agency showed that a third of working graduates were in non-professional jobs, such as cleaning and customer service, six months after leaving university.

Clifford decided to retrain in a more marketable skill; but studying in the UK proved too expensive. He used StudyPortals to research courses in different countries, eventually settling on a course in construction management in Hämeenlinna, Finland, a city of roughly 70,000 people. “I knew that tuition was free, their English is very good and that the level of education here is high,” he says. “I’m the first person to come here from England in a really long time, apparently. There are only two Finnish people in my class of 21. I think nine are Russian, then there’s a guy from Ghana, two guys from Nepal, a Chinese guy, two from somewhere further east and two from Kosovo.” Clifford is enjoying the different culture. “In Leeds, my first experience of freshers’ week was lots of binge-drinking. Here, we’re doing a group presentation at an event in the woods on Friday.” He can already see new opportunities. “Once my four years here are up, I might be able to work in Finland, or in the UK, or I’ll have all these contacts in different countries. It gives you a wider pool of people to draw on.”

But first he has to graduate - and that’s not always so easy outside the UK. “People don’t realise there’s a big failure rate in year one,” says Martin Hyde of The Student World, which places medical and dentistry students at universities across Europe. “It’s not like in the UK, where often the first year is a bit of a coasting year. You’re expected to work hard from day one.”

“There were a lot of students from the UK when I started out. But there weren’t quite so many by the end of my first year,” says Sam Hufton, 23, who graduated with a BA in arts and culture from Maastricht this summer. He applied after a family member heard about

English-language tuition on a radio programme. If he hadn't, he probably wouldn't have bothered with university at all, now that the fees are so high. In the end, he enjoyed his degree in Maastricht so much, he's about to start an MA. But he can see why others might struggle. "The workload is intense, and people aren't prepared for it. I think quite a lot of people found that their course didn't exactly resemble the one they thought they'd signed up for."

Perhaps one of the biggest differences for students abroad is the extent to which they're left to fend for themselves. "We like to make families aware that it's not quite the same as studying in a UK university," Hyde says. "For example, there isn't the same kind of infrastructure for accommodation. There aren't student halls. You have to go out and find a flat in the local town."

"Everywhere is so full," says Elizabeth Sonubi, 19, from Essex. She chose a course in architectural technology and construction management at KEA in Copenhagen after her mother paid a visit to a university fair at the Emirates Stadium in London, and came home with armfuls of prospectuses. But Sonubi has spent the first few weeks of her new life in a hostel near the harbour. "It's definitely not a long-term solution. It's really, really hard to find accommodation, because no one ever leaves. Students come here, love it, find themselves a nice Danish boyfriend or girlfriend and decide to stay. There's just no room."

Back in Maastricht, Emily Fau-Goodwin, 18, from Nantwich, has just started a degree in European law. "I came here the day after my A-level results. It felt pretty sudden. It was a bit frightening." She is renting a studio flat in a large house, "but I've not really seen anyone else in the house. I share my bathroom with one other person, but I think they must be away quite a lot, because I haven't met them yet."

She admits to feeling homesick at first. "It did feel quite strange, living on my own." For freshers' week she was teamed up with a group of Dutch students. "They all spoke English most of the time, but sometimes they'd forget. At first I remember thinking, 'Please, God, help me find another English person.'" Now, she says, she has settled into student life, with a circle of friends of different nationalities ("Everyone speaks good English"); but it's easy to see how her experience might have overwhelmed others her age.

In the UK, there's been a much greater focus on the mental health of students over the last few years. But do students abroad feel supported in the same way? "There have been team-building exercises," Jaska Clifford says. "They have a welfare office that seems to be hands-on with help." But with such a diverse range of study opportunities on offer, it won't be the same for every new student settling into life abroad.

In some cases, students are taking matters into their own hands. Sereen Fatima is part of a group in Plovdiv trying to start their own international students' association. "We hope to create a platform for students to raise their concerns, get more organised events going and have a bit more integration with the Bulgarian students' union." She's already part of a tradition where British students in the years above help nervous new freshers to settle in. "We all remember what it's like," she says. "I don't think you ever forget your first few weeks, do you?"

This article was amended on 5 October 2015. Tuition is not free in Maastricht; fees start at €1,984 (£1,465) a year.

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