

## **International University Week 2025 – Our Experience in Norway**

The International University Week 2025 took us — three students — to Porsgrunn, Norway. Our adventure began on March 30th with an early flight from Berlin to Oslo. Despite the rainy weather, we didn't let it dampen our spirits and explored the Norwegian capital on foot. We were impressed by the harbor, the stunning views of the fjords, and the unique saunas, where you could jump straight into the ice-cold sea, a fascinating first impression of Norway.

After our shoes were soaked and our arms tired from pulling our luggage, we boarded the train to Porsgrunn — exhausted, but full of anticipation. The two-hour journey through the Norwegian landscape set the perfect mood for the week ahead. Upon arrival in Porsgrunn, we checked into our hotel, having decided against staying in the so-called Lavvo Camp on the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN) campus — it was still too cold for us at night. We ended the evening with a relaxed pizza dinner with students from Austria.

The next morning, we started with breakfast and walked to the campus, a beautiful walk through the small town. There, all international guests were warmly welcomed with an inspiring talk about cultural differences from the keynote speaker Julien S. Bourrelle. His presentation immediately sparked our curiosity to get to know the diverse cultures among the participants.

We had lunch almost every day in the university cafeteria, where a varied buffet awaited us. In the afternoon, we went on a hike through the Norwegian countryside together with the other students. The exchange about differences in education systems, personal experiences, and student life was especially enriching. The destination was a breathtaking viewpoint overlooking the fjords, a true highlight. Back on campus, various countries presented their culinary specialties, and we were particularly delighted by the wide range of international sweets. The day ended with a beautiful sunset at the promenade along the Porsgrunnselva River.

Tuesday began early with a field visit to the NGO *Signo* in Andebu. The organization supports deaf and deafblind individuals and offers services at five locations across Norway. The word "signo" comes from Latin and means "I'm signing", referring to the organization's use of sign language and various alternative and augmentative communication methods in their work. In Andebu, we visited a school with a boarding house and several residential homes. First, we listened to presentations about the organization's work, including one by two employees using sign language, which was interpreted for us. We also toured the on-site farm that incorporates animal-assisted education. There's even a small church built with special speakers to lie on the floor and feel the bass of the music — an intense and interesting experience even for us as hearing people. The respectful and individualized work of Signo left a lasting impression on us.

On Wednesday, the diverse workshops began. One of the most interesting sessions was led by PXL University and titled *"Me in a Superdiverse Society."* We discussed various theories on diversity and collaboratively developed new perspectives on our role as future professionals in an increasingly diverse world.

In the afternoon, we joined an interactive campus rally. At each station, we had to answer questions about one of the participating countries — from traditional dishes to political systems. It was not only informative but also a lot of fun. Afterwards, we participated in "Student Activities" organized by Norwegian students — games like boot throwing, Kubb (Viking chess), and sack races. In the evening, there was an international student party on campus, where we not only enjoyed the music but also got to know different drinking cultures — a fun end of the day.

Thursday was entirely dedicated to exciting workshops. A special highlight was the seminar *"Enhancing Social Work Through Animal-Assisted Interventions,"* designed by two of our fellow students. Besides theoretical insights on methods, areas of application, and case studies, an interactive World Café offered an opportunity for international exchange on the opportunities and challenges of animal-assisted work—an inspiring contribution. Other workshops addressed the psychosocial needs of young adults with sickle cell anemia and the support of parents of critically ill children in pediatric intensive care. Both topics impressively demonstrated how diverse and essential the field of social work is across different contexts and countries.

That afternoon, we had a special experience: ice bathing in a 5°C river. It took quite a bit of courage, but the feeling afterwards was incomparable — an experience we wouldn't want to miss.

The evening ended with a festive dinner in the campus cafeteria. Everything was elegantly set, and the menu featured typical Norwegian dishes such as fish with lemon sauce, meat, and fresh vegetables. The dessert was delicious tiramisu. In a celebratory atmosphere, the certificates of participation were handed out. Later, we wound down the evening in the hotel lobby playing cards with other international students.

On Friday, it was time to say goodbye. After one last breakfast and a short closing program including a Zoom call with other IUW locations to share impressions and highlights, we began our journey home. During the train ride, we enjoyed the impressive Norwegian landscape one last time and reflected on the week. After a final airport adventure and some souvenir shopping, we flew back to Germany — with a firm resolution to return to Norway one day.

Participating in the International University Week was an unforgettable experience for us. Not only did we make new friendships and expand our intercultural competence, but we also gained valuable insights for our professional futures. The variety of workshops and personal encounters made us realize how broad and meaningful the field of social work truly is. We would recommend this opportunity to everyone — no matter how short such a stay might be: you will return enriched!