

# Higher-Ed Hygge

Published 3/16/2018 by [Ashley Ribbel](#)

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in the **March 2018 issue**

“The Little Book of Hygge” by Meik Wiking of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen captured world-wide attention in 2016<sup>1</sup>. After Denmark achieved first place ranking in the United Nations 2016 World Happiness report, this best-seller outlined “The Danish Way to Live Well.”<sup>2</sup>

*Hygge* is the term used to describe the Danish sense of well-being. It has recently gained widespread popularity, in many countries, as a source of inspiration to improve happiness and quality of life. Although difficult to translate, *hygge* implies a feeling of authenticity, warmth, and togetherness. The book suggests that the closest Canadian equivalent is “hominess” (Canada ranked 6th in the UN report).



As a guest lecturer at the International Week of Business Culture at The Aarhus Business Academy in Denmark in December 2017, I was intrigued to find out if the hygge-effect applied to Higher Education, specifically to their business programs.

## **The International Week of Business Culture and Etiquette, Aarhus Academy of Business, Aarhus, Denmark**

The Aarhus Business Academy, in the Danish city of Aarhus, was recognized in 2017 as “European Capital of Culture”<sup>3</sup>. It has 4,700 full-time students, 900 international students, and 400 employees. They offer diploma and Bachelor degree programs in Business, IT and Technology, Web, Media and Communication, Environment and Agriculture, and Biotechnology.



The International Week of Business Culture and Etiquette was a week-long event with invited guest faculty from Europe, Canada, and Asia in support of academic goals of internationalizing the business curriculum. It featured a series of lectures about the business culture



in the guests' home countries, using the Hofstede 6D Model<sup>4</sup> as a basis for comparison. This model supports quantitative comparison of national cultures by scoring them on six dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. There was also a focus on cultural differences in professional selling tactics and team dynamics. I was the only North American representative; the invitation was initiated by a connection made with a Danish professor while lecturing in New Delhi, India the year before.

Preparing these presentations contrasting the Canadian business culture with other countries not only gave me an opportunity to take stock of personal experiences in international management roles, it was also a wonderful conversation-starter for collaboration amongst many of my Seneca faculty peers. Their contributions were generous and fascinating. For example, Professor Gord Smith provided "how to" tips specific to professional selling in Canada that turned out to be particularly meaningful to Danish entrepreneurship students who already had well-developed business plans that included B2B market entry strategies for Canada. Using the Hofstede model to deconstruct cultural norms in Canadian advertising messaging – with the kind assistance of Professor Anthony Kalamut – proved to be the most impactful presentation in the series. With the support of the Newnham and Markham Sandbox teams, Seneca's first semester Marketing diploma students also prepared videos analyzing Canadian advertising messages and shared them with the Danish students via YouTube at the conference. Our students' review of the hip hop artists Drake's OVO record label and Roots collaboration received a lot of attention from the Danish students. It can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

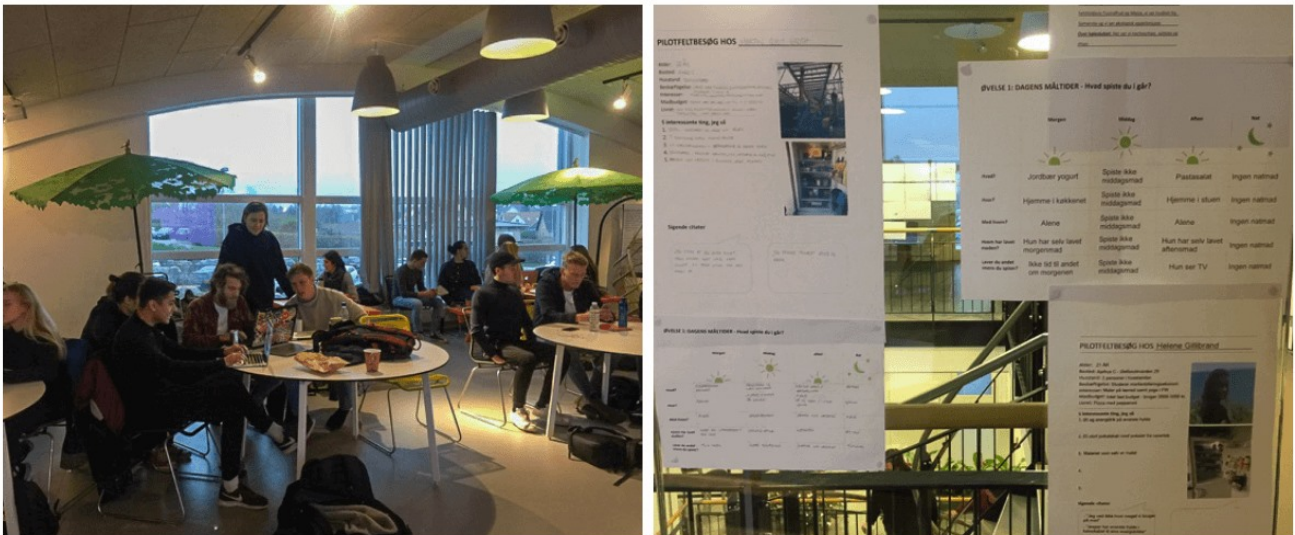


The Aarhus Academy of Business has a very similar approach to postsecondary Applied Business education as that of the Ontario College system. At a professional development session conducted by their faculty, they described their educational platform's pedagogy as being based on practice-orientation and relevance (involvement of companies and internships), experience-based learning, a knowledge base of theory and practice, active student participation, and continuous evaluation and feedback. Unlike us, evaluation during the semester is informal. Student final grades are entirely decided in a panel oral exam at the end of the semester where students defend their prepared analysis of an integrative case study.

## How Hygge is it?

The campus at which the conference was held was the site of the Academy's business programs. Evidence of the "Hygge factor" was everywhere. Not surprisingly, given that there is only moderate diversity amongst faculty and students, the academic culture was closely aligned to Danish culture.

Students enjoy workspaces that are indeed cozy and functional – and even a little quirky. The entrepreneurship space has decorative palm trees and picnic tables. Examples of student project work is posted on the walls throughout the buildings. Accessible and comfortable student breakout rooms are used extensively for group work. They are booked electronically, and room availability is displayed digitally in real-time.



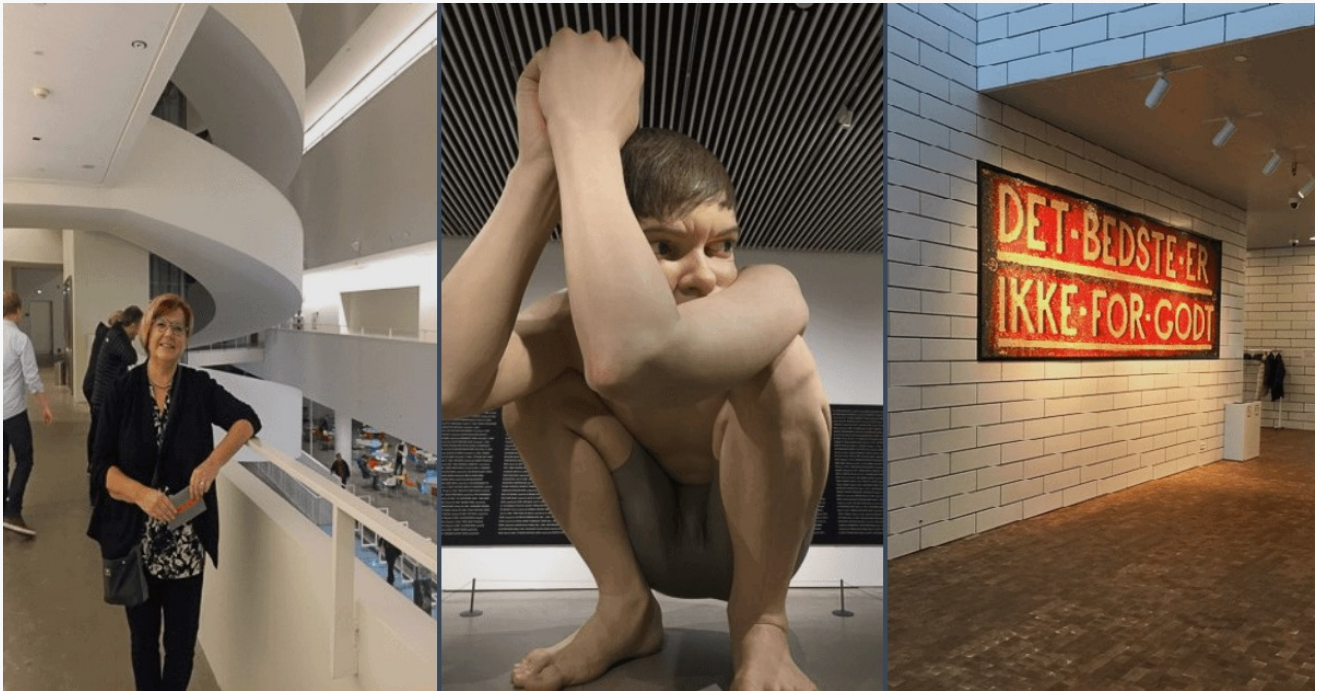
Faculty benefit from an even more "highly-hygge" environment. There are fully-equipped kitchens near each faculty office with dishes, coffee makers, dishwashers, fridges, and microwaves. Faculty meet for a mouth-watering catered buffet lunch every day (the cost is deducted from their pay). Colleagues spend time chatting in the kitchens between classes and at lunch every day. The dress code is very casual. Relationships between faculty are more open and unguarded, again reflecting a more collectivist and less competitive dominant culture. The college Christmas party was a candle-lit sit down dinner that included a folk-song sing-a-long led by their guitar-playing President.







We also toured many of the outstanding cultural landmarks in Aarhus with faculty from the Business Academy. They served as provocative touchstones for faculty discussions regarding teaching philosophies and best practices and creative classroom activities.



It is important not to mistake the collectivist, non-hierarchical, open-minded, and nurturing or “feminine” aspects of the Danish culture for an academic culture with less than rigorous academic standards. Because student tuition is paid by the government<sup>5</sup>, a high level of maturity and co-responsibility for learning is expected from the students. Rules are strict – students are not permitted to enter class late and cellphones/laptops are not permitted in most classes. The summative high- stakes oral defense of integrative case studies require students to extemporaneously defend their work and determines their entire mark for the semester. A single panel exam can determine a passing or failing grade for up to three courses at once. For example, Marketing, Operations, and Finance might be combined in one case and one exam. Students are, however, able to appeal to be given a second chance to pass the final.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the “hygge” nature of higher-ed in Denmark is best captured in quotes from the history exhibit at the Lego House in Billund, Denmark; the birthplace of Lego. Just as the Lego Group describes its mission of creating joyful moments and playful learning experiences, the post-secondary learning community in this happy Nordic culture benefit from the belief that “play is our brain’s favourite way of learning” – all without compromising

academic standards.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Wiking, Meik. *The Little Book of Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well*. [London]: Penguin Life, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> McGregor, Jena. "The U.S. doesn't crack the top 10 happiest countries in the world." *Washington Post*, 16 Mar. 2016. Academic OneFile, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A446467242/AONE?u=king56371&sid=AONE&xid=d02f5104>. Accessed 14 Jan. 2018.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aarhus2017.dk/en/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>

<sup>5</sup> Eligible Danish and EU Students also receive a "SU" grant to cover living expenses.

View the [March 2018 issue of the Academic Newsletter](#).

tags : faculty-reflections, march-2018, seneca-international