

LESSONS TO LEARN LOCALLY

A comparative case study of two international business programmes at UCN

This paper aims to provide insight into and compare the existing Internationalisation at Home (IaH) practices in two international business programmes offered by University College of Northern Denmark (UCN), to this end analysing both their formal and their informal curricula (Leask, 2009; 2016). This comparative case study relies on qualitative data collection methods. Its findings show that the faculty is committed to internationalisation, but lacks a holistic IaH vision and consistent IaH practices. The paper offers practical suggestions for enhancing the programmes' IaH activities within the existing curricular structures. The suggestions could be applied to other international programmes at UCN or to other university colleges (*professionshøjskoler*) in Denmark.

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INTRODUCTION

This study addresses two top-up professional bachelor programmes at University College of Northern Denmark (UCN), which admit students with a two-year academic degree. Both programmes include the word "international" in their title: *International Sales and Marketing (ISM)* and *International Hospitality Management (IHM)*.

The internationalisation of higher education can be addressed in terms of institution policies, strategies, and curricula. The following definition of internationalisation by Killick (2014, p. 33) sets the framework:

"A complex set of processes which are identified by and incorporated into the activities of an individual institution through which all its students experience their subject as globally situated, their peers as equals, and perspectives as always challengeable, and graduates as global selves, with the confidence and the capabilities to make their way among diverse others on the basis of a critical awareness of the impacts of their actions."

A newer aspect of internationalisation, Internationalisation at Home (IaH), is defined as:

"the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and

informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments". (Beelen & Jones 2015, p. 69) IaH is not an aim in itself; it is a range of tools and activities aimed at developing international and intercultural competences in all students without involving outward mobility (Leask, 2016; Beelen & Jones, 2015). Multiple arguments have been proposed in favour of IaH, because in addition to the environmental concerns about flying, mobility is costly and time-consuming. Moreover, the current COVID-19 pandemic imposes severe travel restrictions. In a recent interview, Jos Beelen suggests that these factors render IaH increasingly relevant (Jones & Beelen, 2020).

laH studies have been done in different European universities and higher education systems. Harrison & Peacock (2010) and Harrison (2015) explore laH in two UK universities, Van Gaalen & Gielesen (2016) offer an overview of laH in the Dutch higher education system, while Nilsson (2003) focuses on the Swedish perspective on laH. There are lessons to be learnt from all these cases, but it is critical to investigate the unique curricular structures of a specific educational institution. Just as with internationalisation of the curriculum, laH is specific to the environment of the given discipline and study programme (Leask 2012 in Beelen & Jones 2015, p. 64). Learning must be gleaned from local contexts (Wacher, 2003), which in this case are professional bachelor programmes at UCN, a Danish university college.

The purpose of this study is to explore and compare the internationalisation practices of both UCN programmes, with a focus on laH. Although these programmes admit home and international students, home students are the focus of this study (i.e., students who have completed their secondary education in Denmark). Internationalisation practices at UCN regarding international students are discussed elsewhere (Simonsen, Hammershøj, & Miller, 2018). The object here is to investigate the nature and extent of the programmes' laH practices as well as their perceived outcomes for home students. Another aim is to create more awareness about how laH practices can be improved at UCN and other university colleges in Denmark.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Faculty and students can move around Western Europe at a relatively low cost (Beelen & Jones, 2015), and exchange and mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ abound. However, student mobility is still not an inclusive practice, as there are multiple personal, institutional, and

societal barriers to student mobility, explored in depth by Ernlund (2014). Harrison (2015) proposes that laH makes internationalisation more accessible to all students, providing home students with globally relevant knowledge and skills without their having to travel abroad. Harrison & Peacock (2010) list the following components of laH:

- Introducing students to intercultural learning through co-studies with international students and through incorporating alternative perspectives and examples from other countries and cultures in teaching,
- Enhancing the curriculum with internationally or globally themed modules,
- Exploiting the internal dynamics of the “international classroom” and the diversity of learners,
- Using IT to extend educational opportunities beyond national borders, and
- Encouraging a sense of global citizenship, agency and responsibility among students and staff.

Beelen & Jones (2015) also include such laH elements as comparative international literature and talks by guest lecturers from companies, universities and communities from other national and cultural backgrounds.

As a concept, laH falls under internationalisation of curriculum (Beelen & Jones, 2015), which Leask (2009, p. 209) defines as:

“the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning processes and support services of a program of study”.

Such a curriculum “will purposefully develop their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens” (ibid.). Here, the two key dimensions are the international and intercultural.

Whereas the international dimension concerns activities between two or more nations, the intercultural dimension focuses on encounters where one party perceives the other as culturally different (Plum, 2008). Both perceived and objective cultural differences can exist within a single nation, e.g., Denmark. In an excellent publication by the Council of Europe, Barrett et al. (2013) argue that for culturally diverse societies to function successfully, they urgently need to acquire intercultural competences. They define intercultural competence as a combination of attitudes, knowledge and applied skills that enables individuals to “understand and communicate with each other across all kinds of cultural divisions” (Barrett et al. 2013, p.2).

Leask further distinguishes between formal and informal curricula and argues that internationalisation should be achieved through a combination of the two. A formal curriculum is defined as: “The syllabus as well as the orderly, planned schedule of experiences and activities that students must undertake as part of their degree program”, whereas an informal curriculum is:

“various support services and additional activities and options organized by the university that are not assessed and do not form part of the formal curriculum, although they may support learning within it.” (Leask 2015, p. 8, as cited in Beelen & Jones 2015, p.61).

While the formal curriculum is the official foundation of the programme, the informal is constructed through faculty understandings and practices. This study explores the above laH concepts in the context of two UCN programmes, as explained in more detail in the following section.

METHODOLOGY

The research design employed in this study is a comparative case study. Data collection methods include

content analysis of secondary data sources such as the internationalisation sub-strategy (an umbrella UCN guideline) and the formal curricula of both programmes (see the List of secondary sources). According to Leask (2009; 2016) and Beelen & Jones (2015), the curricular and institutional strategies play a defining role in IaH practices. The documents were screened to assess the use of the words *international*, *internationalisation*, *global citizen(ship)*, *global mindset*, *intercultural/cross-cultural skills*, *diverse and diversity*. This part of the data analysis focused on the formal curricula.

The primary data collection methods included qualitative semi-structured interviews with four out of ten faculty lecturers. The questions for lecturers aimed to explore certain aspects of formal and informal curricula as well as the aspects of IaH elaborated by Beelen & Jones (2015) and Harrison & Peacock (2010), such as the use of international literature and guest lecturers, the development of intercultural competence in students, and the extent and nature of study and social activities designed to facilitate collaboration between home and international students.

Owing to the COVID-19 lockdown in May 2020, the interviews were conducted and recorded via Microsoft Teams, and the recordings were transcribed and coded. As a faculty member associated with both programmes, the author has first-hand knowledge of the

contexts, but this also means the interviewing process and analysis may show a possible bias.

The second strand of data collection involved structured written interviews with recent graduates, ten from the ISM programme and nine from IHM (n=19). The respondents graduated in January 2020. All home students (ISM, N=51; IHM, N=24) were contacted twice by email before and after graduation with an invitation to participate in the study. No compensation was offered, so participation was voluntary. Recent graduates were chosen over current students as they could reflect on their completed education. The graduates were given the same IaH-based questions as the lecturers but were also asked to comment on whether their education had prepared them to enter the global market.

Written interviews limit the depth and degree of elaboration of the responses, but the open questions allowed respondents to provide more detailed answers. The results are presented below.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Content analysis: UCN Internationalisation Strategy, formal ISM and IHM curricula

The UCN Sub-strategy for Internationalisation 2017-2020 has the following mission:

By 2020, UCN has a distinct global mindset in all education and knowledge areas and among students as well as staff; UCN has

a profile as one of Denmark's leading international university colleges, with an international study environment, value-adding international partnerships, and study programmes which are relevant to the region of Northern Denmark as well as globally (Sub-strategy, 2017-2020, p. 9).

Internationalisation is described as a precondition for UCN graduates' success in "an international labour market, whether in Northern Denmark, in the rest of Denmark or outside our borders". If Northern Denmark is seen as part of the global market, it seems critical that students acquire intercultural competence, but this idea is not expounded further.

The concepts global mindset, student diversity, internationalisation of curricula and Internationalisation at Home (IaH) are referred to, but not elaborated. The document suggests that each study programme should find its own internationalisation model; individual programmes can therefore be expected to interpret internationalisation differently, guided by their respective curricula.

The ISM and IHM curricula (the national umbrella curricula and their institution-specific extensions) were screened for occurrences of the terms *internationalisation*, *international*, *intercultural/cross-cultural competences*, *global mindset*, *diverse*, *diversity* and *IaH*. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Mentions of IaH-related concepts in IHM and ISM formal curricula, 2018-2020

	No. of mentions in ISM national curriculum	No. of mentions in ISM institutional curriculum	No. of mentions in IHM national curriculum	No. of mentions in IHM institutional curriculum
International, internationalisation	24	1	0	0
Culture/intercultural competences	0	2	0	1
Global mindset	0	0	0	0
Diverse, diversity	0	0	0	0
IaH	0	0	0	0

There is an obvious contrast in the national curricula of the two programmes. While the ISM document consistently refers to international markets, sales, company development perspectives, legislation, supply chains, etc. (24 mentions), the IHM document contains no mentions of the word international. As Table 1 shows, other word mentions are virtually non-existent in the screened documents. As such, the foundation for internationalisation in the curricula is limited (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Beelen & Jones, 2015): the development of intercultural competence and a global mindset in the students is currently absent from the formal curricula.

INTERVIEWS WITH LECTURERS

The interviews with lecturers were aimed to provide insight into how they perceived internationalisation and how the informal curricula were constructed. The four interviewed lecturers (two from each programme) are clearly dedicated to the internationalisation of their respective programmes. All have substantial international experience, a working proficiency in English and a natural international perspective in their didactic practices. Key findings are presented below.

The formal and informal curricula: internationalisation in practice

Both programmes widely employ international academic literature and case study materials. Danish companies are also used as cases, and guest lecturers are invited from local companies. However, the focus is often on international business activities, such as entering new markets, international marketing activities and customer service. The academic literature and theory used follow US and Western European traditions and schools of thought. The industry cases refer to businesses in Asia, Africa and sometimes Central and Eastern Europe.

The ISM programme offers an elective module, *Emerging Markets*, where basic cultural concepts are introduced; about a third of students choose this module. Both programmes offer international study trips as an elective, although only 15-20% of the students participate. The study trips are highly educational, but the students who stayed at home get no opportunity to share in this knowledge, and accordingly only a minority learn from the cultural experiences. The IHM programme also offers a study tour in Denmark for students who cannot travel abroad.

The students of both programmes are actively encouraged to take an international internship, but only few home students do so. At the beginning of the ISM programme, a particular study activity requires home students to work with their international colleagues on an assignment. After this, the students are free to select their study groups, and the majority choose to work in monocultural groups.

Students taking the IHM programme are mixed in the second semester. They are encouraged, but not compelled, to work together in culturally diverse groups, which results in little collaboration between the two student cohorts. Home students are particularly reluctant to work with international students, a circumstance that supports the UK findings of Harrison & Peacock (2010). IHM lecturers confess to a dilemma with regard to creating culturally diverse study groups:

“I should do it more in my classes. I know it’ll be good for them, and I know they’ll look back at it as a positive experience, but there is always, always resistance in the beginning.” (Lecturer 1, IHM)

“As a teacher I feel an obligation to do it, because they will get so much out of it... But at the same

time, they should show interest in other cultures. Why should I be forcing them?” (Lecturer 2, IHM)

Development of intercultural competence

The programmes use different approaches to developing intercultural competence. While the IHM programme teaches intercultural competence through a combination of theory and practice across different courses, the ISM programme has no explicit focus on intercultural skills. It is assumed that such skills are developed through interaction (however limited) with international students or during internships abroad. ISM students are therefore expected to learn by doing, with no theoretical understanding of culture-related concepts. As ISM Lecturer 3 says, “the development of intercultural skills for us is a by-product of different study activities.”

The IHM programme creates abundant opportunities for students to socialise and collaborate through “mixed” activities such as introduction week, company visits, guest lectures and field and study trips. However, few students avail themselves of these opportunities to establish friendships or professional networks across the “home” vs. “international” divide. International students are more active in developing international peer networks, whereas home students are reluctant to leave their comfort zones, e.g., they do not speak English unless required to do so and do not seek the company of international peers for social purposes. ISM respondents report similar patterns:

“We have 38 international students enrolled this year... I doubt the Danish students know their names” (Lecturer 4, ISM).

Employability skills and the global labour market

The respondents are unanimous that their professional field is international



Photo: Lucia Tomandayová

IHM students on a 'mixed' company visit at Næsbydale hotel in North Jutland.

“by definition”. They see the international perspective as an inherent way of perceiving and learning about the world. However, the respondents’ worldview does not match the programme context. After graduating, most home students seek employment locally, in North Jutland. The local labour market is not seen as part of the global market; the region has some large international companies, but foreign language proficiency or intercultural skills are not critical for employment. The regional labour market has yet to create a sense of urgency to internationalise the curriculum further, and the lecturers acknowledge that:

“I see a challenge in incorporating the international dimension in our curriculum, as we also have obligations to the local, regional tourism and hospitality industry, which mainly caters to domestic guests” (Lecturer 2, IHM).

As the success and future development of both programmes depend on their graduates’

employability rates, students are encouraged to cultivate local and regional networks, and the skills required for the global labour market become less relevant to lecturers.

laH: the status quo

It appears that laH is still not part of the lecturers’ household language: not all respondents are familiar with the concept. Lecturer 1 (IHM) confesses: “I feel like I should know what it is, but I don’t...I feel a bit ashamed, actually”. Lecturer 3 (ISM) calls laH it “a very interesting perspective”:

“It’s really cool that the students can gain cultural understanding and be better prepared for the global labour market, while they study at home – and there is huge untapped potential for us here”. (Lecturer 3, ISM)

This is a point on which all respondents agree: both programmes attract a range of culturally diverse students whose experiences can be harnessed for the benefit of all

students, home students in particular. UCN practises the didactic model of reflective practice-based learning (RPL), and the students’ diverse reflections could create new dynamics in the classroom (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). The lecturers volunteer suggestions on capitalising on student diversity:

“For example, this year we have many students from Slovakia – we could ask them to make a presentation about their country, culture, market conditions. That would be useful knowledge sharing”. (Lecturer 4, ISM)

“Some of our students may have rich experiences from the restaurant industry in, say, rural Romania. When I teach hospitality, it seems obvious for me to include <these experiences> in my teaching”. (Lecturer 2, IHM)

However, so far, the discourse about the student composition is still locked in the “Danish” vs. “international” dichotomy. This

simplistic representation interferes with an exploration of student diversity. The respondents are aware that Chinese, Spanish, and Lithuanian students come from different cultural contexts and should not be treated as a “homogenous grey mass”, in the words of Lecturer 2, IHM. Similarly, the cultural diversity of home students is not leveraged. The respondents tend to focus on the international dimension, neglecting the cultural and regional variety within Denmark.

The diverse student composition and the highly motivated and internationally minded faculty create fertile ground for developing a consistent IaH strategy. “We are doing a lot already, but we can – and we should – do more”, concludes Lecturer 1, IHM.

The graduates’ perspectives are presented in the section below.

INTERVIEWS WITH GRADUATES

There are some similarities in the responses of the two graduate cohorts. Both report that the respective programmes have given them better international (and sometimes intercultural) understanding and skills; however, there are differences in how they interpret the knowledge and skills. In the quotations below, pseudonyms are used.

International and intercultural competence

Both IHM and ISM graduates appreciate the purposeful and consistent use of international literature and case study materials, as such use offers a broader understanding of the industry and different perspectives on the theoretical material. Some admit that reading academic texts in English was difficult, particularly at the beginning of the programme and especially as they had been used to literature in their native Danish in their previous studies. However, they consider reading English an enriching learning

experience. They report that the international dimension is not limited to a module designated as being international, but is an integral part of such courses as management, strategy, and economics:

“Even though the first semester was in Danish, the economics class was very international: all the concepts, definitions, and the computer simulation programme we used were international... Besides, we could participate in an international competition on hotel revenue management.” (Sarah, 28, IHM)

Similarly, they name multiple study activities that increased their intercultural understanding and skills: classroom teaching, cases and discussions, international guest lectures and study trips. Some IHM graduates reflect on their learning experience on an advanced level, showing a nuanced understanding of cultural theory:

“The most important intercultural skills I took with me <from the IHM programme> was the understanding of cultural sensitivity and being able to decode my own understanding of a topic, so that it would be more understandable to somebody culturally different from me.” (Theo, 27, IHM graduate)

Others still relate to the international students as “Eastern Europeans”, a generalisation or even a misconception showing a lack of intercultural competence.

The ISM graduates were not taught cultural theory; their learning is a result of international group work and the international study trip, which catalysed socialisation with international peers:

“I have gained a much better first-hand knowledge of other cultures, such as Iran, Slovakia,

Bulgaria, Romania and France, as I started to hang out with international students after we were together on the study trip” (Laura, 24, ISM).

Two ISM respondents comment on the lack of theoretical intercultural knowledge they received in the programme and suggest that they could have benefited from more intercultural, mixed group work. Intercultural competence is therefore seen as an area of untapped potential in the ISM programme.

Intercultural cooperation and socialisation

As the IHM students were not required to work together in culturally diverse groups, they report that their intercultural group work was limited to class discussions and short assignments. Only two respondents consistently worked in culturally diverse groups, having actively chosen to follow the international line of studies. The majority tended to work in monocultural groups, confirming the findings of Harrison & Peacock (2010). Some admit that they fall back on familiar relations and networks; they would have preferred to be required to work in “mixed” groups, as the resulting learning experience is stimulating:

“The few times we were actually mixed, I experienced more interesting discussions with different cultural perspectives, which opened my eyes towards other solutions I would not have otherwise chosen” (Johanne, 29, IHM graduate)

For ISM graduates compelled to work in culturally diverse groups in one activity, intercultural collaboration sometimes brought challenges. International peers were called “slackers” (Josefine, 29, ISM graduate), and described as less

committed to project work, less punctual and piggybacking on their Danish peers. Such statements suggest that both home and international students could benefit from intercultural training before embarking on such activities (see the Discussion and suggestions section).

Several respondents mention the study trips (international and local), where they got to know their peers better. However, socialisation across the two student cohorts can only be described as limited, and several respondents regret the inadequate interaction they had had with the international colleagues, both in and outside the classroom. This is another potential development area, as students who formed culturally diverse friendships in their college years tend to develop higher moral judgments and think more broadly (Derryberry & Thoma, 2000), which Killick (2015) also sees as a mark of successful internationalisation in higher education.

Lessons learnt

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the respondents name multiple positive outcomes of completing their respective bachelor programmes, such as:

- Better English proficiency, which results in higher self-confidence and willingness to seek employment in an international company in Denmark or abroad,
- Stronger intercultural communication skills,
- Better understanding of different international markets and marketing approaches,
- Use of more creative approaches to problem-solving,
- A more curious, critical and open-minded thinking, and
- Development of an international personal and professional social network.

Beelen & Jones (2015) suggest that IaH can make a key contribution to

the development of transferable employability skills, and the above outcomes confirm this idea. The discussion of the findings and practical suggestions are presented below.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings from both programmes show that a solid foundation exists for developing IaH, even though the UCN internationalisation strategy could be more coherent and comprehensive, and the formal IHM curricula do not focus on internationalisation. Both programmes have strong assets: an internationally minded and motivated faculty with the professional experience and academic competencies to further internationalise the programmes. The existing practices allow students to broaden their perspectives, thus opening new vistas for navigating the professional challenges, a finding that supports the IaH aspects presented by Beelen & Jones (2015). Since IaH is not a conscious strategy for these programmes, creating awareness about the positive outcomes of IaH and providing faculty members with directions and practical tools are necessary if these programmes' IaH approach is to be enhanced.

The IHM programme appears to be more successful at involving international lecturers and guest speakers than ISM, but both programmes have room for improvement. Here, IT tools can become useful as never before. Back in 2015, Beelen & Jones stressed the importance of digitalization in teaching and learning, as it facilitates opportunities for international online collaboration. In 2020, one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic was the increased openness of lecturers and industry representatives to the use of digital tools such as an online lecture or a virtual international company visit (Jones & Beelen, 2020).

As both lecturers and graduates report, the fact that the programmes admit both home and international students holds a wealth of untapped potential. The fundamental structural division into "Danish" and "international" classes limits the opportunities for consistent interaction. Ideally, for IaH to succeed, profound structural changes such as introducing creating international and culturally diverse classes throughout the programme would be the best solution.

However, positive change is also possible within the existing structures. Both programmes can create more study and informal activities throughout the academic year, requiring students to work and socialise together. The key here is to make consistent efforts to bring students together and support them with a shared understanding of the benefits such initiatives afford. Harrison & Peacock (2010) conclude that home students are reluctant to join intercultural study groups and activities. Therefore, lecturers should provide guidance, facilitation, and follow-through of all international and intercultural study activities. It is simply not enough to assign students to the same class or group and leave them to work things out.

The data shows perceived and, in some cases, actual cultural differences between the work ethic and study approach of home and international students. The perceived differences cause resistance to collaborating with cultural others. Cultural training for both groups of students could be one way to address and overcome this resistance. Training could take the form of tailored workshops aimed at increasing intercultural competence, combating passive xenophobia (Harrison & Peacock, 2010) and, ultimately, creating a common cultural ground for effective intercultural group cooperation and

friendships between students (Derryberry & Thoma, 2000). These workshops would support the institutional curricula for both programmes (pp.17-18), which state that lecturers must assist students in their social learning processes, constructive cooperation, good learning environment and group dynamics and processes.

Consistent international and intercultural collaboration at home will make all students, home students in particular, more confident about working in intercultural teams in their future careers. Another desired outcome would be a more nuanced cultural understanding. Students are dichotomised into “Danish” and “international”, the latter often being labelled as “Eastern European”. Since students in both programmes also come from Central and Southern Europe, the Baltics, China and Vietnam, such labelling is simply incorrect. This diversity could be leveraged much more effectively in classroom activities, where students could be asked to provide insight into their culture and relevant market or industry structures. Such study activities would comply with the learning goals defined by the curriculum, whilst engaging students on a personal level and making cultural knowledge relatable.

Both programmes could capitalise on their existing international activities: internships and study trips abroad. International study trips are an excellent source of positive socialisation between students but can also support peer-to-peer learning, where students can prepare short reports, posters or videos after the trip to share their new knowledge with their “stay-at-home” colleagues. Similarly, channels for sharing international internship experiences could be created, and students could be asked to come up with suggestions on peer learning



IHM students on a study trip to Beijing, China.

channels and activities, thus contributing to the IaH mindset of the study programmes and benefiting all students.

Finally, and most importantly, the UCN’s internationalisation strategy should reinforce the faculty’s motivation to internationalise at home by recognising the programme’s existing untapped

potential. The cultural diversity of UCN students, guest lecturers and (g)local companies in Denmark and North Jutland provides fertile soil for further IaH. Other existing opportunities to exploit include the wealth of digital communication and learning tools, which allow us to collaborate more with educational institutions and companies

from neighbouring and remote countries. As strategy is recognised as a key factor in developing laH practices (Leask, 2009; Leask, 2016; Beelen & Jones, 2015), the UCN internationalisation strategy could be vital in creating specific and feasible guidelines for laH in all UCN's education programmes.

CONCLUSION

To summarise the results of the study, the IHM and ISM programmes both benefit from some laH practices, mainly thanks to the faculty's international mindset and commitment. Both programmes have a diverse student composition and

faculty with the competences to enhance their laH practices. Many lessons can be learnt locally without necessarily involving outward mobility. Nonetheless, the laH practices lack consistency and require an overall laH vision and strategy on UCN level that could institutionalise laH practices in different programmes.

The suggestions this study makes have been developed within the existing formal curricular structures. Implementing them would require the programme leaders to develop the laH mindset, provide support and draft a dedicated strategy. Investing a few resources in

creating cultural workshops for students and in academic and social activities could enhance intercultural competences and socialisation, thus minimising the current frustration with such activities and increasing satisfaction among both groups of students. Finally, the suggested activities to create a consistent laH mindset could be transferred to other UCN programmes that admit both home and international students, as well as to other Danish university colleges.

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