

Our Nordic Neighbours: The Present State of the Danish Community in Scotland

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Introduction

Scotland and Denmark have a long, shared history of cultural contact, driven initially by Viking and Norse settlers from the eighth to the fifteenth century. Whilst these Viking invasions made a significant and lasting impact on the Scottish language, place-names, cultural practices, and genetic diversity, there has been a revived interest in Scotland's Nordic connections in recent years, sparked in part by debates surrounding the Scottish independence movement and devolution. Rather than contributing directly to the discussion on Scotland's historic ties with Scandinavia, this paper will instead focus on the current Danish community in Scotland, consisting of Danish migrants and students of Danish, as well as the institutions, social organisations, and support structures for Danish language and culture in Scotland. In light of the UK's secession from the European Union on 31 January 2020, this paper will also explore the views of members of this Danish community on issues regarding identity, networking, bureaucracy, and language in Scotland, the UK, and Denmark. The core research questions to be answered as such are as follows:

1. In what ways do Danish culture and language thrive in Scotland?
2. To what extent can there be said to be a ‘Danish community’ in Scotland?
3. To what extent has this dynamic changed following Brexit?

It is the intention of the author that, rather than presenting a fully representative sample of opinions, the discussion in this paper should provide a snapshot of views pertaining to life in the Danish community in Scotland today. For clarity, the term ‘Danish community’ shall here encompass both migrants and students, as well as their family and friends in Scotland who actively partake in the expression of Danish language and/or culture in Scotland through social gatherings and/or education.

Denmark, Danes, and the Danish language in twenty-first-century Scotland

According to data from the UK government’s EU settlement scheme, there are around 1,490 Danes living in Scotland.¹ A handful of organisations and institutions are dedicated to the promotion of Danish culture and language in Scotland. The Danish-Scottish Society (and its social media presence Danish-Scottish Network) is the largest social organisation for Danes living in Scotland. Founded in 1986, the society currently has around 200 members and raises funds through membership fees in order to achieve its goal, namely to ‘establish a social framework for Danes to meet with Scots and other residents of Scotland who take an interest in Denmark, its language and its culture, as

1. UK Government 2021.

well as for Danes to meet each other'.² With membership open to Danes and non-Danes alike, the events and activities organised by the society act as a catalyst for cultural contact and exchange.

Alongside traditional Danish celebrations such as Sankt Hans, Mortens Aften, and Fastelavn, the society also hosts regular social events in pubs, cafés and parks for members to gather, discuss life in Denmark and Scotland, and socialise more generally. Moreover, the society operates the Danish School in Scotland, which provides group education in Danish language and culture every second Sunday to children between the ages of five and sixteen. It currently has around eighty members.³ Whilst most of these classes take place in Edinburgh, classes were held online during the Covid-19 pandemic, which allowed members from elsewhere in Scotland to participate.

An unpublished, informal survey conducted by the Danish-Scottish Society on 100 Danes living in Scotland reveals some detailed insight into the dynamics of the Danish community in Scotland. Although 79% of all respondents live in Scotland permanently, only 42% of all respondents are members of the Danish-Scottish Society, with the location of society events being frequently cited as a hindrance to membership. Around a third of Danes live in the Edinburgh region, with another third in the Glasgow region, and the rest spread out elsewhere in the country. Around half of respondents note that they have Danish friends in Scotland, but whilst 71% of respondents would like to occasionally meet other Danes, only 56% would like to meet other Danes regularly, though 55% of respondents would like the opportunity to speak more Danish.⁴

The Danish-Scottish Society runs a number of social-media pages to promote its activities, foster membership, and

2. Danish-Scottish Society 2019.

3. Danish-Scottish Society, *Danish School in Scotland*.

4. Danish-Scottish Society, *Survey on Danish Community in Scotland*.

contribute to its constitutional objectives. In 2020, the society set up the page Danish-Scottish Marketplace on Facebook as a platform on which to trade Danish items, foodstuffs, and gifts in Scotland. Whilst the marketplace itself currently has 251 members,⁵ the Scottish market for Danish items is complimented by a handful of Danish shops in Scotland, including Nordic Living by Biehl, BoConcept, and Flying Tiger. In addition to its own, members-only social-media presence Danish-Scottish Society (104 members), the society also administers the Facebook group Danskere i Skotland (518 members) and the page Danish-Scottish Network (959 followers), both of which are open to non-members.

Social media has arguably become the predominant means for Danes and those interested in Denmark to network. It has also filled a gap left behind by the former Danish Cultural Institute. Established at Doune Terrace, Edinburgh in 1956, the Danish Cultural Institute functioned as a hub and venue for Danish music, art, literature, and culture in Edinburgh. Throughout its almost sixty-year history, the Danish Cultural Institute hosted a number of guest artists, politicians, diplomats, and students from Denmark and formed close ties with the Scandinavian Studies section at the University of Edinburgh, hosting annual Danish Christmas dinners with university students and staff. Upon closing in 2015, the then director of the institute, Kim Minke, addressed the role of social media in the closure of the institute, stating:

[...] improved communications have reduced the need for a physical premises in many European countries, but the cultural differences between some developing nations and Denmark mean an institute is necessary.⁶

5. *Danish-Scottish Marketplace* 2022.

6. The Newsroom 2015.

In terms of opportunities for language acquisition, the sole institution in Scotland offering courses in Danish language and culture at undergraduate and postgraduate level is the University of Edinburgh. Founded in 1987, the Scandinavian Studies section currently has six permanent or full-time staff, a handful of honorary fellows and part-time staff, and upwards of 150 students, of whom approximately twenty-five study Danish language and all of whom study aspects of Danish culture and society.

Danish language was first taught in the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures by Bjarne Thorup Thomsen, who retired in 2021 as the section's longest-serving member of staff. At present, Danish language and culture is taught by a teaching fellow and a teaching and research fellow. In addition to undergraduate and postgraduate tuition, Scandinavian Studies organises a range of public seminars, workshops, conferences, and events relating to Danish (and Scandinavian) culture and society. The University of Edinburgh also hosts the Northern Scholars scheme, which was set up in 1956 in order to '[...] foster co-operation between scholars of the Nordic countries'.⁷ The scheme currently welcomes two to three academics per year to give departmental seminars and public lectures at the University of Edinburgh. The Centre for Open Learning at the University of Edinburgh also offers a number of evening courses in Danish language for members of the public. At present, around twenty students are enrolled on Danish language courses at the centre, taking courses at beginner and intermediate level.⁸

7. The University of Edinburgh 2022a.

8. The University of Edinburgh 2022b.

Exploring the Danish community in Scotland: methodology and limitations

In order to obtain the data required to answer the research questions, focus-group research was conducted in two key communities in Scotland with close ties to Danish culture: group 1 consisted of members of the Danish-Scottish Society, whilst group 2 consisted of recent graduates of the University of Edinburgh's MA honours programme in Scandinavian Studies with a language specialism in Danish. Participants in group 1 were recruited through an open invitation on the Facebook page for the Danish-Scottish Society, whilst participants in group 2 were recruited via an email invitation. The groups were invited to participate in a group-specific discussion led by the principle investigator (PI). Full informed consent was obtained from all participants, whereby each participant was informed of the aims, structure, purpose, and outputs of the study, as well as their rights and options regarding data protection, anonymity, and storage. The study was also approved by the University of Edinburgh LLC ethics committee.

The criteria for inclusion in the study varied for each group so as to reflect the overall dynamic of each group's relationship to Denmark. As group 1 consists solely of first-generation Danish migrants, potential participants were invited on the basis that they had been resident in Scotland for at least one year before Brexit (31 January 2020) and one year after Brexit, declared themselves to be active in one or more of the aforementioned Danish organisations/institutions and/or felt part of a Danish community in Scotland. Following recruitment according to this criteria, group 1 gained four participants, plus the PI.

For group 2, which primarily consists of students who have acquired skills in the Danish language and an understanding

of Danish culture through undergraduate study, the criteria for inclusion was to have completed an undergraduate degree in Danish language and/or culture in Scotland in the past year and to have been primarily resident in Scotland during that time. Following recruitment according to this criteria, group 2 obtained three participants, plus the PI.

It should be noted that the PI also meets the criteria for inclusion in both groups.

Both group discussions were structured in such a way as to facilitate natural dialogue between participants with minimal prompts from the PI. The role of the PI in these discussions was to steer conversation towards the research questions without following a set script or forcing direct answers. Dialogue between the PI and participants was also encouraged. In the section below, the main discussion points have been highlighted and the overarching conversation streamlined in order to maintain relevance to the research questions. For sake of clarity and conciseness, parts of the discussion that were irrelevant or off-topic have been omitted here but included in the full transcript, which is held by the PI and can be accessed if requested. All names have been pseudonymised, whereby each participant's name has been replaced using a number to represent their group and a letter to represent their name (e.g. 1A).

Group 1 participant info and discussion

The meeting for group 1 took place in person at a Scandinavian-themed café in Edinburgh on 22 July 2021. In addition to the PI, the group consists of the following members:

- 1A: a Danish woman in her thirties
- 1B: a Danish woman in her twenties

- 1C: a Danish woman in her thirties
- 1D: a Danish man in his forties

Participants were briefed on the research questions, and the PI began by asking whether life as a Dane has become more difficult or easier after Brexit. 1D replied that ‘it’s kind of been coming at the same time as the Corona crisis so it’s hard to distinguish [...]’. All participants agreed with this and began to tell stories of how they had not seen their family in such a long time.

Given the proximity of Brexit to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear that not enough time has elapsed to gauge the impact of Brexit on travel between Denmark and Scotland. Nevertheless, 1A noted that Brexit has impacted her connection with Denmark due to new import fees on packages, stating that ‘I got my birthday present held up in the customs and had to pay £65 to get it out and it was a sweater. It wasn’t that expensive’. The other participants concurred with this notion.

1A then continued, saying that ‘[...] I feel less welcome in a way [...] not [by] the people, the Scots are lovely as always, it’s more like the, sort of, bureaucratic aspect of things’. 1D joined in here, saying that ‘the fact that we [...] need to apply for settled status to [...] prove that we are entitled to be here kind of sticks in my craw. I’ve been living here since 2006 [...] this is my home now and it’s not right that the rights that I have taken for granted [...] I need to apply to protect them’. 1C agreed, stating that ‘it’s a bit weird to have permanent residency and then have to apply for settled status [...] now I’ve got to justify even staying where I am’.

After sharing a few more personal stories regarding customs charges and travel, the PI asks what the participants feel about the sense of a Danish community in Scotland and whether there is a strong sense of a network. 1C responds, saying:

[...] I spent eight years in London where there is also like a Danish community but to me it feels very different [...] I personally never really got involved because I was sort of like 'what's the point'? People will be gone soon anyway whereas in Scotland people are here a bit more permanently than they are in London [...] I think it has the potential to be a more lasting community than in London but it requires a lot of effort on the part of people who organise it.

1A replies, stating:

I've been here for four years but I've just recently sort of discovered the Danish-Scottish community [...] I was aware of it but I never really engaged with it because I sort of had my friends in the beginning from my master's studies and work friends, etc. I kind of wish I had discovered it earlier because, particularly now after, like, the separation from family and friends during Covid and Brexit, it was so nice when we went to the football match together [...] speaking Danish again and I really enjoyed that.

1C notes:

I lived right next to the Danish Cultural Institute for a while. I used to go in all the time and ask what the next events were [...] it was always very family-focused. People who had married Scottish people. What about the people who are here alone? [...] Eventually they closed down anyway but I tried really for many years to find other Scandinavians and really fell flat [...] the community is a bit fraught.

The PI asks why football was mentioned as a success story for bringing Danes together. 1C replies that it is because

we're quietly proud of being Danish. We don't need to talk about it every day [...] but when stuff like reaching a semi-final in football happens [...] we were there to watch the football but then we could also engage and interact and have a bit of fun and, like, let out a bit of the Danishness and then go back to our daily life.

1B joins in by noting that '[...] it's one of the few times where I'm like, oh, I wish I was with other Danish people [...] I'm missing that'.

The participants return to a discussion on how the Danish-Scottish community is too family-focused and suggest that more inclusive events such as Sankt Hans or Melodi Grand Prix would help to build the community network. Nevertheless, the participants noted that many Danes who move abroad do not engage much with other Danes as they are busy with other aspects of their lives abroad. On this issue, 1A says that 'you're so keen on assimilating or sort of becoming part of the place'. 1D replies that 'I was a passive member [of the Danish-Scottish community] for quite a long time and then when my son was born there came a need for it [...] I need this Danish community for him to, kind of, develop his connection to the country'.

1A responds that:

[...] it is a great idea to start with like national events or important days to Danes because [...] that's when you remember your Danishness and want to seek out other Danes [...] I think more people are likely to turn up to Sankt Hans or Mortensaften rather than just a sort of random Wednesday evening at a pub.

Group 2 participant info and discussion

The meeting for group 2 took place in person online using Zoom on 21 July 2021. In addition to the PI, the group consists of the following members:

- 2A: a female Danish graduate in her twenties from England
- 2B: a female Danish graduate in her twenties from England

2C: a female Danish graduate in her thirties from Scotland
Participants were briefed on the research questions, and the PI began by asking in what ways Danish culture and language thrive in Scotland or at university.

2A begins by pointing out

it thrives in a commercial sense because even just, you know, a few meters away from the Scandinavian department you've got Söderberg [a Scandinavian-themed café] [...] but there are a surprising amount of Scandinavian shops [...] that have helped with my understanding of the language and the culture [...] I remember being in first year and going into Tiger [...] and being like 'oh I can use that word in class' even if it is just something like stationery.

2B joins in by stating that 'products are always, like, slightly a part of it, aren't they?... what you aspire to, like the aesthetic'. 2C replies that 'as the Nordic Noir came into fashion and the whole Scandinavian obsession started in Britain then it became very trendy to speak a Scandinavian language'.

The PI then asks how the students connected with Denmark whilst living in Edinburgh. 2C mentions the Danish Cultural Institute as a key factor, but the other graduates are unable to

relate, not having experienced it themselves. 2C undertook an internship at the institute as a student and notes that ‘I think it definitely helped me because it made sure that I was speaking Danish, I was there maybe twice a week [...] and I got a bit of insight into how it is being in a Danish workplace because it is very different to working in Britain’. 2B says that:

we have the Scandinavian Society [...] at the uni there are quite a lot of Scandinavians, not necessarily Danish, but I did meet quite a lot of them and some of them were actually really sweet and tried to help me, you know, with connections and things on my year abroad [...] the Scandinavian department is quite small and feeling connected and able to talk to teachers I guess was a really important part of it [...] maybe if it had been a different language department or, like, it had been a bit bigger then it might not have been as easy to feel [...] included in a community.

2B continues:

I will also say that that also prepared me for the teaching style a bit in Denmark because [...] in British universities the teaching style is very, like, top down [...] when I compare it to experiences other people have had in uni, like, we are a bit more on an equal footing.

2A suggests:

I think the size of our class helped [...] you can't help but start to rely on each other even more in an area where the language isn't spoken particularly widely [...] it seems that the Scandinavian department saw us on an equal footing and did everything they could to help us.

2C replies that ‘maybe because the department is so open and friendly and welcoming meant that I wasn’t prepared for the fact it is not like that [in Denmark] and people are really reserved’.

2B remarks that ‘the Scandinavian department [...] they all communicate with each other in their own [Scandinavian] languages [...] Scandinavians in real life don’t really do that. They kind of switch to English [...] they don’t make the effort.’

The PI then asks whether Brexit has impacted their experience with Denmark and Danish. 2B responds by saying

[...] that kind of became an icebreaker question that Danes often ask me [...] they would ask me about Brexit and how I felt and it kind of just became an ongoing joke [...] since graduating, Brexit has possibly affected how nervous I feel about trying to move over [to Denmark] and the admin that that is going to take.

2C says that ‘[...] after Brexit I feel like [...] Scotland is like this little underdog and a lot of people here [in Denmark] support independence [...] it’s definitely, like, a talking point [...] and people seem to think that Scotland could be more Nordic’.

2B reflects that ‘[...] would I, if Brexit had not happened, been a bit more lazy and more passive in terms of moving over? It would have been like “oh, it’s not going anywhere [Denmark]” [...] now that it is difficult [...] I need to get it done’.

Conclusion

Whilst the Danish community in Scotland is relatively small, it is clear that several actors are invested in the promotion of the Danish language and culture. Since the withdrawal of

the Danish Cultural Institute, much of this activity has been adopted by interest groups and private citizens keen to maintain a sufficient support network for fellow Danes. In addition to the handful of cultural events annually, education in the Danish language at nursery and university level is a key asset in maintaining Scotland's connection with Scandinavia.

It should nevertheless be emphasised that despite these efforts, the vast majority of Danes in Scotland are not very engaged with the Danish-Scottish Society or the University of Edinburgh, and the responses above suggest that participants do not feel a strong sense of a Danish community. This is not the case for graduates of the university, who generally praise the small and close-knit Scandinavian academic community as a net positive to their personal development and future careers.

The stereotype of Danes as being reserved and difficult to bond with is perhaps reflected in the responses from the focus groups, whereby this cultural facet presents an obstacle to networking. Although it may be the case that Danes in Scotland have sought to assimilate rather than integrate, moments of national importance, such as football championships and national celebrations, present an opportunity for Danes in Scotland to experience and express their Danishness, albeit in small bursts. Without an official physical presence in Scotland, such as a cultural institute or embassy, however, there are few places for Danes and Scots to network and learn about Denmark in a structured or wide-scale manner. As such, it can be assumed that the University of Edinburgh and the Danish-Scottish Society remain the only viable guardians of Danish culture and language in Scotland.

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