

Exchange experience Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

My study programme

An important thing to keep in mind while choosing your courses in Leuven is that you are only allowed to take master courses. Overall in my experience, these courses are significantly harder than the bachelor courses that are offered in Groningen. Additionally, the courses will be taught over the course of a semester, this means that there are no blocks like in Groningen. This increases the amount that has to be studied in the end significantly. Personally I would not recommend choosing Master courses as I found to regret it later, I had to drop one of the master courses and will have to resit it later causing a delay in my graduation while I never had to take a resit in Groningen and was hoping to graduate cum laude.

Furthermore, there are significant differences in teaching when it comes to exchange students and Belgian students. A striking example is that for some courses there were seminars available, comparable to working groups. These were available to Belgian students but exchange students were barred from taking those spots. I found this very difficult to comprehend as it caused a significant lack of practice and knowledge that was provided to Belgian students but not to exchange students. It did not feel fair as teachers would not explain certain parts that were already explained in the seminars, international students would never learn those parts as we were prevented from going to seminars.

Overall, I would not recommend going to Leuven unless you are very certain you are able to take master courses, you generally do not need to participate in working groups and you do not expect to take any courses in Dutch.

The examinations were different from normal university of Groningen style examinations, you have to keep in mind that everything is handwritten and that the course material taught over the whole semester will be questioned, there is thus a lot more material to study.

Generally regarding the amount of courses I found KuLeuven to require an excessive amount of courses as courses only get about 3-6 ECTS there. This required me to in the end take 7 courses which was definitely too much for me to handle and caused me to have to drop one course.

Language

If you are Dutch and expect to take Dutch-taught courses in Leuven, it must be mentioned that the courses available to exchange students in Dutch that are not purely about the Belgian legal system are very limited. The only realistic option that I found that I could take was the history of international law, which I took and is the only course I would recommend as it might be quite pointless to learn specifically about the Belgian system. However whether this is useless depends on your specific situation of course.

Housing

KuLeuven provides housing, I highly recommend choosing housing that I approved by the KuLeuven first, these rooms and studio's will be offered on their website. If the landlord is not approved by the KuLeuven there are no guarantees that the housing situation will be

sufficient. The rent costs about the same as in the Netherlands it might even be a little cheaper as I found.

Preparation and contacts with the faculty abroad

The preparation was very good, there is a specific person for Erasmus students to contact during the preparation for their exchange. This person will send you a list of available courses to exchange students and other information about information days or social events in the beginning of the exchange.

Finance and other conditions

There were not many additional costs to living in Leuven, the only costs that I had to pay upon arrival were optional. There was the choice to receive a bus pass for 20 euros with which you could travel in and around Leuven for the rest of the semester which I recommend. There were also optional insurances as it is mandatory to be ensured in Belgium. Furthermore, there was an university service for renting a bike called Velo which I do not recommend, most bikes from there are second hand and broken, the costs are about 15 euros per month and for 17 euros you can rent a brand new bike from SwapFiets which I recommend. My bike from velo broke and there was no pick up service, so you need to find a way to get your bike back to the velo bikeshop to get it fixed which meant an hour of walking for me. Swapfiets on the other hand has a pick up service.

The estimated costs of living in Leuven per month are about the same as one would spend in the Netherlands, however as it is an exchange it might cost a little more if you wish to travel. I would estimate that housing would generally cost 400 euros on average for a room in the centre and that groceries, activities including travel and clothing would cost about another 600 euros which would give a total of 1000 euros per month on average.

Guidance / reception at host university

During the first week you will not receive lessons yet at KU Leuven and there was an intro-week. During this week there were several activities for exchange students to participate in like for example a museum trip or a guided tour through the city. There were also faculty specific events for example only for law exchange students. I found these events to be a lot of fun, most of them are organized by ESN Leuven.

During my stay there was a person assigned that I could speak to. In the beginning there was a lot of guidance however towards the end of the semester it would have been helpful if it was explained how exams work exactly in Leuven for example as all the exams are handwritten and in essay form requiring you to write a couple of pages per question, this was new to me and took some getting used to.

Culture, free time and travelling

In Leuven there is the international group ESN which organizes many activities especially in the beginning. I highly recommend participating in these activities as they will help you know your way around Leuven. We also got lectures about Belgian culture here and tips on where to study, go to the gym and insurances etc. These sessions were generally very helpful!

Furthermore, Belgium has generally a little bit of a more closed off culture to foreigners, this was also explained in the lectures on Belgian culture, this might make it a little more difficult to get in contact with other Belgian students.

A big difference with Dutch culture is the importance attached to hierarchy, while it is completely normal in the Netherlands to email your professor or to ask questions during lectures, I do not recommend doing the same in Belgium. It is generally not perceived as desirable that students ask questions during lectures or contact their professor themselves, there are in-between contact persons for any questions. If you are Dutch this might be a big difference to you.

Lastly, brussels is a great point of departure to travel to other cities in Europe, you are quickly in Paris or London by train which is very nice. Also, Brussels itself is a great destination, it is a very international city which is nice.

Other

In my personal opinion I would not recommend going to Leuven. While there were some positive aspects of the exchange the study delay it caused me and the difficulty of the courses were not worth it.