

## Erasmus+ Review at KU Leuven

One of my best choices at university is to jump out of my comfort zone and to exchange in Belgium. My motivation to do this is to experience the differences of studying as well as of life in both countries.

Like one quote on the welcome brochure of KU Leuven, international students are exposed to different thoughts from people with various cultural background. Besides, the way people are living is not at the same between Bremen and Leuven.

I will explain these difference as well as review my exchange experience in the following text in a chronological order.

### **Before the mobility**

Once you decide to go to exchange, it is necessary to plan with details and keep the deadlines in mind.

#### 1. Select a country

Which language is used in daily life and in educational activities in that country? How much is the monthly cost of life? How far is it from that country to Germany? Basic questions like those should be taken into consideration before you make a final decision.

Apart from those, whether a visa is needed in that country is also a vital element.

#### 2. Select a university / program

After you choose the country, you are going to research about universities and programs offered there. You can inquiry the international office at Uni Bremen. They put their desk at least twice per semester in Mensa. Their website is also very helpful. There you can find different programs, as well as requirements and formalities for each program. Besides many useful reviews like this could be found on their website. You can also inquiry the exchange coordinator on your faculty for information about credit transfer.

It is the ranking of KU Leuven that motivates me most to choose it. I am wondering what elements KU Leuven has worth its extremely good reputation. Additionally, they have English-taught courses, so language will not be an obstacle for me. Last but not least reason for it, is that the distance between Belgium and Germany is acceptable. So that I can commute between Belgium and Germany as often as I want.

There are many other criteria except mine to pick a program, for example, whether the courses provided attract you, whether the research interests of particular professors match yours, and so on.

#### 3. Apply for a study place

Using "Mobility-Online", the applying system is the next step after your decision. It will show you the process as well as your actual progress. This system will be used until the program is finished.

To apply for the study place, you have to upload your CV, motivation letter, language certificate and transcript of records. These documents should be handed in to the faculty coordinator as well.

Cheek your progress regularly, because the nomination result will be informed on Mobility-Online.

#### 4. Apply for the visa

Once you received the study place, you should think about your visa.

I hold the German study visa, so I do not need to apply for a new visa in Belgium. Instead I need to report my arrival to the city hall of Leuven and apply for Annex 33. It is better before you enter Belgium inquiry your guest university as well as the embassy about these legal formalities.

Before I left, I deregistered in Bremen. But I should not have done that, because it is not necessary to report your short leave for exchange. Not to mention you will come back after five months.

5. Find a flat in advance

Compared to the situation in Bremen, it is easier to find a flat with reasonable price in Leuven.

[Kotwijis](#) is a KUL-supported platform for students to find accommodation. You can choose any housing type including KU Leuven residence, residence in cooperation with KU Leuven, and so on. You can set the rental period, rental term, price limit, as well as details in the accommodation like wheelchair accessible, number of boys/girls, smokers/non-smokers as you like into the search engine.

In the search results, some accommodation is marked with a "K". This is "Kotlabel", which is issued to an approved kot. You can trust the flats with Kotlabel, because they have good results regarding quality of living, fire safety, contract, and student friendliness.

Besides the platform Kotwijis, you can find flats through their own advertisement on the street. "Te Huur" means "to rent" in Dutch, you will see some windows with this advertising board when you hang out in Leuven.

It is better you sign on the rental contract after you check the room on site. KU Leuven also provides a model contract in English, which protects your and the landlords' rights. Additionally, you could ask Housing Service at KU Leuven for help to proof rental contracts, when the landlord does not use the standard one.

I rent a room from a private landlord. It is 12 square meters with all basic furniture and costs 325€ per month. Usually the longer you rent, the lower the monthly price it will be. It is worth mention, in some flats there has been internet offered by KU Leuven already, so you do not need to sign a new contract with internet service provider. If you want to use the internet wirelessly, you have to bring a route, because in most flats there is only one internet cable.

6. Pre-select the courses / fill in Learning agreement

The last but very important step before your mobility is to preselect the courses and fill in the Learning agreement.

You have to arrange which are the modules you want to study abroad as early as possible. My plan is as following:

Time	Module	Credit (ECTS)
1. semester	A.1 Medienkulturen	12
	C.2 Medienkulturpraxis	9
2. semester	A.2 Medienwelten	12
	D.1 Methoden	12
3. semester	A.3 Medienwandel	12
	D.2 Medienkulturforschung	12
Exchange semester	A.4 Selbststudienmodul	6
	B.1 Kulturetheorie	9
	B.4 Freies Wahlmodul	9
5. semester	D.3 MA-Arbeit/Kolloquium	27

Before you select the courses, you have to keep some regulations not only from Uni Bremen but also from the Erasmus+ program and from the guest university in mind.

The Erasmus+ program requires 30 ECTS to be studied per exchange semester. Although I need just 24 ECTS to be recognized at Uni Bremen, I have to select 30 ECTS in Belgium. The spillover could be regarded as „Freiwillige Zusatzleistung“.

At KU Leuven, I was in the management of Faculty of Social Science. The most part of courses are required to be selected within this faculty. You can choose up to two courses in master-level offered by other faculties.

The coordinator at KU Leuven will send a course list to exchange students, which shows the names of the courses have been selected before. For more information like course description, exam and/or papers regulation, you could search on the KUL website.

Then you could fill in the Learning agreement before the mobility. It should be signed by you, the coordinator in your faculty at Uni Bremen, and the coordinator at KU Leuven. You are allowed to change any courses after you are in Leuven and sign on the Learning agreement during the mobility. Therefore, do not worry whether the pre-selected courses suit you or not.

### **Short before the mobility**

At least one week before your departure, you should think about the transportation and short-term accommodation for that journey.

I recommend you take bus or train to Leuven, so there is no limitation for your luggage. I took Flixbus from Bremen to Brussels, it spends about six and a half hours. Then I took an IC-train from Brussels to Leuven. Alternatively, you could travel by air. There is an airport in Brussels, which is 15 min away from Leuven station.

Because Leuven is quite a tiny city, so it is convenient to walk from A to B. There are buses in Leuven, if you carry many pieces of luggage, you could take the bus. You can buy a bus ticket from the driver or you could buy 10 times ticket for 16€ on the bus station. But be aware, the buses are not always on time and there is strike very often.

For the first night after arrival, you could book a room on Airbnb or in a youth hostel in advance. I booked two nights in a youth hostel, because it takes time to check the flat and clean it before moving in.

### **During the mobility**

I promise you will fall in love with Leuven after your arrival. It is an energetic city with lovely young people. Study hard and play harder is their spirit. I will introduce my experience in the following five parts.

#### **1. Orientation week**

The orientation week begins one week before the course starts. You will receive a plan about the activities during the orientation week and you have to register for them online.

The most important activity in the orientation week is the welcome session. On this meeting, you should hand in all formalities including the resident permission, registration document at Uni Bremen and other asked documents. You could choose whether to buy a culture card for 16€ and a student bus pass for 20€ or not. With the culture card, you could enjoy exclusive discount for most museums and theaters in Leuven. With the student bus pass, you can take any busses in Leuven during the academic year for free.

After the session, you will be asked to take a portrait photo for your student card.

You can take your student card one day after the session in Naamstraat 22. With your student card, you are allowed to enter all libraries, to get student price for meals in Alma, and to use most sport instruments for free except the fitness.

During the orientation week, you will be asked to hand in your rental contract to the Housing Service and will be invited to welcome dinner held by your faculty and other very interesting social activities. The last activity I highly recommend you take part in during the orientation week, is the guided city tour. You will get a general historical understanding of Leuven and find a street named "Drinkwaterstraat".

2. Select the courses / fill in Learning agreement

At the beginning of the first week during the exchange semester, the Faculty of Social Science will organize a meeting to inform some regulations about course selection. Like mentioned before, you have one week to think and re-choose courses. In the case to avoid overlap of courses, you have to pay attention to the course schedule.

After making the final decision about course selection, it is time to sign on the Learning agreement during the mobility. It needs signature from you, your coordinator at Uni Bremen as well as at KU Leuven.

3. Campus and city life

**Campus life**

The atmosphere in campus is quite friendly and keen. I joined two student unions. One is Pangaea. It is established by KUL but organized by both university and students. They have their own building on the campus social science. There you can get free coffee and tea as long as you are a member of them. They organize many social activities for international students, including weekend trip, language night, and non-academic seminars.



*Photo 1. Clock in the central library*

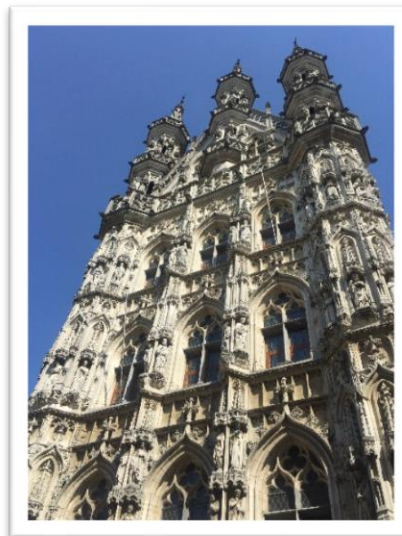
Another organization I joined is ESN (Erasmus Student Network). With them, I went to the Canaval in Maastricht in the Netherlands. Besides, they organize some practical trips, like visiting the beer factory, together going shopping in IKEA, and so on.



*Photo 2. Canaval in Maastricht with ESN*

### **City life**

Apart from studying, Leuven has many things to explore. There is a modern fitness in the sports center outside the Leuven ring. You will receive discount with your student card. If you prefer cultural activities, cinema and the special theaters named STUK and 30CC will be your best choices.



*Photo 3. Church in Leuven*

If you would like to explore other cities in Belgium, you could travel by the train during weekends. The farthest trip I took in Belgium is to Oostande, it took about two hours for one way. Brussels, Namur, Brugge, Gent, Antwerp are very beautiful destinations and worth a trip. If you go to Brussels (20 min by train) very often, I recommend you buy a campus ticket on the train station. It costs 5€ to register and about 10€ for five return journeys.

Pay much attention to the security situation in Brussels especially in the train station. It is very safe in Leuven but in Brussels there are more thieves and strange people hanging out on the street. On the day I went back to Germany, my backpack was stolen in the North station in Brussels. My laptop, kindle, iPad and passport, ID were gone and it takes time to apply for a new pass, a new ID and get everything back in order.

If you are a foodie, do not forget to try Belgian frites and I highly recommend Villa de Frit, which is close to the biggest library. Almost everything in Belgium is more expensive than in Germany except frites. Everyday after class there is a long queue outside that store. If you want to try some traditional Belgian dishes, I recommend you try menus on the restaurant street (Tiensestraat). If you are on the budget, you could try The Werf, which is visited by many local students. Last but not least, Belgian snacks worth a try as well.

It is convenient to buy groceries in Leuven on site. There is no Belgian Amazon, all your orders will be delivered from Germany. You could get your packages with "Bringme" box in agora, so that you do not need to go to the shop near train station to get them if you are not at home when delivering.

#### 4. Exams

##### **Exam forms**

There are three forms of exam: oral, written exams and paper. All exams take place during the exam period, one month before the semester ends. I did not have oral exams, so here is only to introduce written exams and paper.

Generally, a written exam takes three hours. According to the teacher of the course, you may be allowed to bring materials. You have to bring student card with you, which is going to be checked before you leave the exam room. The assessment criteria exclude language errors, but clear hand writing is required.

Compared to that at Uni Bremen, the requirements of paper at KU Leuven are different to a large extent. The length of a paper should be at least ten pages (up to 3300 words excluding reference). Additionally, students are asked to write papers during the exam month unlike the situation in Germany, that students write papers during the semester break.

You will be informed your exam grade through Toledo, the virtual learning system. If you fail the exam, you have an opportunity to retake it in the third exam period in August.

##### **Study areas**

It is not easy to get a high grade in both written exam and paper, therefore you will find all libraries are full during the exam month.



Photo 4. Exam period

There are many study areas in Leuven, for example Agora, Law, SBIB, and EBIB. You could check the number of rest places in each library on website. During the exam month, EBIB and Arenberg are open from 8-24 o'clock for seven days.

#### 5. Confirmation the study period

Before the semester ends, you have to ask your coordinator to sign on the document named Confirmation the study period. You will hand in this document to the international office at Uni Bremen either per mail or in person. The sealed transcript of records will be sent through email to you and to your coordinator at Uni Bremen by the coordinator at KUL directly.

### **After the mobility**

When you finish the exchange semester, you are going to make your credits be recognized at Uni Bremen.

At first, you should upload your transcript of records on Mobility Online. Then you need to fill in "Anerkennungsbescheinigung" and hand in that to the coordinator at our faculty. You do not have to register anything on Pabo. After recognition, these credits with grades will be uploaded automatically into Pabo system. At the same time, you will receive a mail, telling you the credits have been recognized.

### **Conclusion**

After coming back, I miss the life in Leuven a lot. I feel grateful to the people I met and to the experience I got. If I were allowed to decide one more time, definitely Leuven again.

The exchange experience helps to shape my personality. Now I feel more confident and have a stronger conviction of my own abilities. Because I am aware of my own strengths and weaknesses. I enjoy study and work with people from other backgrounds and cultures. I am more curious about new situation and like to tackle challenges.

What I gained in Leuven will benefit my future study, work and life, because I know my goals clearly and have sufficient energy to do everything I need to do.

### **Useful links**

List of exchange program:

<http://www.ipkm.uni-bremen.de/de/studium/ba-kommunikations-und-mediawissenschaft/auslandsaufenthalterasmus.html>

Reviews for exchange period:

<https://www.uni-bremen.de/studium/starten-studieren/studium-international/studieren-im-ausland/erasmus-studienaufenthalt/erfahrungsberichte/>

Leuven housing search engine, Kotwijs:

<https://icts.kuleuven.be/apps/kotwijs/search/>

Pangaea:

<https://www.kuleuven.be/english/student-services/pangaea>

ESN Leuven:

<http://www.esnleuven.be/>

Libraries in Leuven:

<https://bib.kuleuven.be/english/ub/about/libraries>