

Faculty of Law, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium)

1. Overall impression

I am/was very happy with my choice of Leuven: the city is small and not too far spread, other great cities are easy reachable and there are a lot of international students and activities for international students. I felt home after a short amount of time.

But when choosing the University of Leuven one must be aware that it has a strong focus on EU law (see below “student life”).

2. Making preparations

(e.g. administrative matters, finding information)

Apart from finding an accommodation (see below), there was not much to prepare for. No Visa is needed. Approx. half a year before the University started, KUL contacted us to fill in a form with our Data and send a copy of our passports. There was no second application with the partner university necessary.

Before having the login for your KUL account, getting informations about the courses is rather confusing. Best is to wait once you are in Leuven and then inform about the lectures.

3. Contacts/Responsibilities

(e.g. important contact persons at the Partner University and Faculty)

Our contact person was Gema Vals Rodriguez. Mostly she came back to you quickly. However, she could not always help, and it was for a long time not 100% clear who is responsible for the practical clinic and when we will be contacted.

While it was easy to contact Gema, it was a lot more difficult to contact professors. It was especially frustrating for several students to get in touch with the supervisors of their mandatory practical clinics.

4. Housing / Finding accomodation

Having different options in Leuven (KOT - houses with around 5 rooms, one kitchen and shared bathrooms; residences; studios), I opted for the residence “the flint”. The residence was newly built, pretty and I felt really comfortable there. The room had its own bath room. However, I shared the kitchen with 11 other students, which lead to a really messy kitchen, even though it got cleaned every week. Also, there were 200 people living in that residence, and accordingly it was almost never quiet (except on weekends, when all Belgium students went home and I was basically alone). I opted for a shared Kitchen thinking that that way you will get in touch with Belgium students. However,

they were very uncomfortable speaking English, which why apart from occasional talks I did not have much to do with them. And this was almost the same in every other residence I heard of.

Retrospectively I would rather opt for a studio with its own kitchen, since I was really bothered by how messy my roommates were.

To find the accommodation, I used the housing services provided by the KUL. I applied for a room within the deadline until end of May, and was contacted by a rental administration within the first week of July. If not interested in a residence room (room or studio), there are some Facebook pages posting rentals in Leuven (e.g. Sharing is Caring Leuven), and also some helpful KOT sites.

5. Arrival

I booked a flight to arrive Sunday before the introduction week started. However, usually you cannot get the room key for a residence on a Sunday (this might be different when in a KOT or a private shared flat), which is why I had to fly in to Brussels a few days before just to collect my key. Otherwise I would have needed to book a hotel for the first two nights.

When arriving in Brussels, you can either take the train or a taxi (see below: train is faster and cheaper than a taxi).

After arrival, you have to register with the city hall within a certain amount of days. Since often you had to wait for at least 1.5hrs, they changed the system and you can now make online an appointment to step by the city hall. Some documents are required (e.g. confirmation of health insurance, rental contract) ... Once registered, the police will come by and verify if you really live on that address. When this is done, you get the papers confirming your registration in Leuven, which are needed to e.g. open up a bank account.

6. Telephone (e.g. costs, carriers)

Almost all international students opted for Orange, paying 15€ each month for 4000 SMS, 4 GB incl. as well as 15€ telephone balance.

7. Bank account

I did not open a Belgium bank account, but made all payments and cash withdrawals over my Swiss Bank account. The costs were pretty low which is why it was not worth opening an account for me. But in case one wishes to do so, almost every bank offers student accounts - but they can only be opened/ used after one is registered in the city hall of Leuven and has the confirmation of it.

8. Transport

(e.g. from Switzerland, to the University)

From Switzerland: Swiss is flying from Zurich, most of the time however flights from Basel with either Easy Jet or Brussel Airlines are cheaper. Just make sure you fly to Brussels Zaventem and not Brussels Charleroi. From Zaventem it takes you 12 minutes by train to Leuven (faster than taking a taxi), from Charleroi its over an hour. Except you have a lot of luggage, the train is a much better option since cheaper (around 9 € one way) and faster.

In Leuven: I bought a bus pass from the University for 20 € which can be used within Leuven. I however not used it once, since my accommodation was situated very central (10 minutes by feet to the train station, 10 minutes to the university). There are however residences further away (e.g. water view), where students had to use the bus frequently. Without a bus pas a bus ride costs 3 €.

Many students rent or buy a bike.

9. General information about the Partner Faculty and student life

The weekly amount of courses is not that high. However, most courses are 4 credit courses, which is why on average 5-6 exams/ courses have to be taken. In general, I had 1-2 days with no classes a week.

Even though KUL has some international law courses for Double Degree, the focus is clearly on EU law, with mandatory courses in substantive law of the EU, judicial protection of the EU and constitutional law of the EU. Those courses also happened to be the most demanding, partially because of the lack of previous knowledge of EU law, but also because of the amount of work you had to put in to.

Also, there was a misunderstanding with the practical clinic: even though it is written on the KUL homepage that also a “practical experience” was possible, this was not the case. The only option was a written paper, solving a case. The organization seemed rather unprofessionals, and was not how expected.

KUL clearly separates Double Degree Students from LL.M. students, and DD-Students cannot take all courses LL.M. students can, and vice versa. Also the practical clinic is in both cases something different.

KUL offers a buddy programme where you get a local buddy. This really helped me to answer some question that came up once settling in Leuven, and gave me the opportunity to also meet some Belgium students. There are great events, especially organized by Pangae.

10. Teaching and studying at the Partner Faculty

(e.g. program structure, methodology, exams, etc.)

Almost no course was interactive - as known from UZH, professors tend to just lecture and not actively involve students (with some exceptions, e.g. Arbitration, Criminal Law). Questions are asked, but only voluntary students get called.

However, most courses required preparation to be able to follow it, such as read case law (especially for constitutional law). Mostly no books were required, but case law and legislature readers.

KUL has a very good online information platform called toledo. Once chosen the courses, there are all informations/documents/exam administrations accessible on one platform.

To study, there are several libraries. The law library is not for studying under the semester but only for research. But there is a study center (Agora), also open on Sundays.

Exams: the grading system is from 0-20, 10 is a pass. In most subjects you have several exam dates to choose from and to make your own exam programme.

If the course requires you to study case law, the exam often also was focused on it (especially substantive and constitutional law).

11. City

(e.g. cultural activities, sports, discounts, nightlife, must-sees, short trips, etc.)

Leuven is a typical student city - it is rather small and everything reachable within half an hour by feet or even faster by bike. It offers lots of activities for international students. It is recommendable to join some of the activities within the introduction week organized by KUL, it will never be easier to meet new people.

The olde market is one of the places to go out, claiming itself to be the "longest bar of the world" due to the fact of several bars/pubs/clubs lining up next to each other.

Belgium people tend to leave Leuven on Thursday night/ Friday morning to go home for the weekend, which is why there are mainly internationals in the city over the weekends.

Many Belgium cities are within a train ride of approx. 1.5 hrs. away from Leuven and can easily be visited on days off (tickets are cheaper on weekends - take a "go pass"). My favourites were Brussels, Bruges and Antwerp. Not really worth a trip is going to the seaside.

Also other European cities are easy reachable, and tickets rather cheap (e.g. plane tickets with ryanair, bus tickets to either London or Paris).

Leuven has a nice architecture. A must see is the old central library with its bell tower (also for studying), the Arenberg Castle in the South and the old Begijnhof in the center of Leuven. But since Leuven is not that big, you automatically come across those sights.