

Exchange report – M.A. English and American Studies – KU Leuven – Winter Term 2021/2022

Why study at KU Leuven?

Why should one study at KU Leuven? Well, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven is one of the largest and oldest universities in the Low Lands. It consistently ranks among the top 50 universities worldwide and has an excellent linguistics department, which is especially exciting for me as a linguistically inclined student. Additionally, the city of Leuven is centrally located in Belgium, full of young people, and has train connections to all major Belgian cities (Brussels, Bruges, Antwerp, etc.), making many cheap and spontaneous trips possible.

Information and support at FSU Jena

Both the information supplied by my departmental Erasmus-coordinator and the International Office were excellent and very helpful. Every step pre- and post-application was transparent and supported by clearly communicated deadlines. Whenever a problem appeared, it was resolved almost immediately.

Information and support at KU Leuven

The Erasmus-coordinator at the KUL faculty of arts was also very friendly and helpful. Additionally, the university provided an orientation week for all international students, and the European Student Network (ESN) offered additional events to meet fellow students. It must be noted that knowledge of Dutch is not mandatory for studying at KUL, and many exchange students do not bother learning it. However, there are free classes for Erasmus students who desire basic knowledge of the local language.

The academic year

The first semester of the academic year already starts in September, which means that there is no long semester break for those coming from Germany to Belgium. The lecture period ends with the Christmas break, the subsequent exam period lasts until the first week of February. The second semester starts directly after that, with exams in June and July. August is exclusively reserved for re-sit exams. One should definitely keep all this in mind when planning potential exams in Jena – I had to cancel two term papers due to the little time between the end of the summer semester in Germany and the beginning of the first semester in Belgium.

Studying in Leuven

The faculty of arts in Leuven demands that their exchange students take at least half of the 30 credits points from faculty of arts study programmes. There is a list of recommended courses, but beyond that, basically any course can be chosen from all classes offered at the university. The courses are divided into Bachelor courses, Master courses and Advanced Master courses, depending on their corresponding study programme. It is not recommended to choose Advanced Master courses, and you need written approval of the lecturer to do so. Nevertheless, I chose several of these courses and managed to pass them successfully. Yet, they do require a lot of work and effort which I did not anticipate beforehand.

The six courses I followed were *Linguistics and AI*, *Natural Language Processing*, *Methods of Corpus Linguistics*, *Lexical Semantics and Lexicology*, *Cognitive Science* and *Cultural Semiotics*. Three of them ended with written, three-hour exams, while the other three demanded term papers as the final project. The freedom of choice that KU Leuven offers is great for students who want to tailor their individual study programme to their own interests and needs. Of the classes that I took, only two were comparable to the content of my study programme in Jena. The other four courses rather served as a source of additional, deeper knowledge on topics that are not taught in Jena. It was really hard to restrict myself to only six classes, because there were many more that also seemed exciting. But in the end I am glad that I did not take even more classes, as my schedule was tight enough with six classes and 30 credits.

The majority of courses at KUL are taught in English, and it was not problematic to follow them. It must be noted that the teaching style in Belgium is less discussion-heavy than what I know from Germany, and even supposedly “interactive” seminars were mostly delivered as lectures. Quality-wise, all courses were excellent and they clearly mirrored the teachers’ reputation as world-class researchers.

I originally had intended to get two courses recognised at FSU Jena, but these courses turned out to be not comparable to any of my home department’s classes. However, two different courses were quite similar in their expectations and content to what is taught in my home programme, so I decided to get these two recognised instead. The whole process was fairly easy and also simplified through the great support from both Erasmus coordinators at home and in Leuven. However, prospective exchange students should not expect every course to perfectly replace some offering at home, the programmes are often just too different to allow a one-to-one correspondence.

Living in Leuven

I was lucky enough to get a room in a student residence. It is advisable to look up all necessary application deadlines directly after getting accepted as an exchange student, because they tend to be very early (~ end of March). I lived in the residence COPAL, where I had a single room with a table, a bed, a closet, and a washbasin. The toilets, showers and kitchen were shared with nine other people from all over Europe (Austria, UK, Belgium, Italy, and Spain). The communal areas were cleaned weekly by a very nice cleaning lady. Student life was very active in the residence, from baking contests over Halloween parties to weekly bar evenings. I can only recommend living in a KU Leuven residence, as it is the easiest way to meet new people and make friends. My whole social circle consisted exclusively of roommates, and I could not have had a better time than with them.

Living in Belgium

To be honest, I did not have many expectations about Belgium before I went on my Erasmus journey, and I was very pleasantly surprised. The day-to-day life in Belgium does not differ tremendously from that in Germany. However, the Belgians are very nice and welcoming people with extremely tasty waffles, chocolate, and beer. Moreover, the Belgian architecture is hardly comparable to anything in Germany. Even while taking late night strolls through the streets of Leuven, I found myself constantly in awe of the beautiful decorations and details on the most ordinary buildings, something I miss very much in Jena.

Costs

The costs of living in Belgium are a little higher than those in Germany. The Erasmus stipend nearly covered my rent of 400€/month, which was very helpful. Supermarkets, bars, clubs, and restaurants are probably 10-20% more expensive than in Germany, and especially fruit and vegetables are extremely overpriced when one is used to German prices. I believe that this is also due to Belgium being so small and the need to import most of the products.

Considerably cheaper than in Germany is the cost of transportation. Going to Brussels by train, for example, is 5,50€ for a single trip. Also the common fast-food chains are as expensive/cheap as in Germany, which made them viable alternatives to the extremely overpriced (6-7€ per meal) student restaurants. Another thing that I can highly recommend is going to the cinema in Leuven. Especially for students, there are always cheap offers (7-8€ per ticket), and all films are shown in English, with Dutch and French subtitles.

While most other students came to Belgium by plane, I always travelled by train. From Cologne, Leuven is reachable in under 2 hours, with only one change in Liège. However, many students who booked well in advance with cheap airlines (e.g. RyanAir) paid less money for their flights than I did for my train rides.

Conclusion

I highly recommend the KU Leuven for an Erasmus exchange and would gladly choose it again. The student life is extremely active and a lot of fun, the quality of teaching is extremely high, the city is beautiful, and so is the country. An Erasmus semester is one of the biggest, if not *the biggest*, adventure a university student can embark on. Learning to embrace a different culture and mentality, meeting tons of new people from all around Europe and the whole world, experiencing a different university and educational opportunities beyond the home institution – all these aspects had a profound impact on me, and it is true that no one comes back as the same person that ventured forth into the unknown.