



ERASMUS-EXPERIENCE REPORT

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Field of study: Environmental- and Bio-resource Management (Focus Mobility and Transport)

Host University: KU Leuven, Belgium

Year of study: Winter Semester 2022/23

Duration of stay: from 09/2022 to 01/2023

Publication of the report

I consent to the publication of this experience report including the above data (field of study, host university, year of study, duration of stay) on the website of BOKU-International Relations for the purpose of sharing information related to the study visit, so that future interested outgoings can inform themselves about your experience at the host institution.

✓ **yes** **no**

The consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without giving reasons with immediate future effect. Any withdrawal can be declared at any time by e-mail to erasmus@boku.ac.at.

THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS WOULD BE INTERESTING FOR FUTURE OUTGOINGS:

1. City, country and people + social integration

Belgium is a very interesting, beautiful, and small country, with lots to see and very good public transport to do so sustainably (and to visit neighbouring countries too). I've only been to the Flemish part of the country, but already there you'll find amazing places, like the seaside at Oostende, the historical centre of Brugge, the beautiful canals of Gent, and of course Antwerp and Brussels. Everything is within easy reach from Leuven.

Leuven is the Flemish name of the city, it's Louvain in French and Löwen in German (be aware on French-speaking train stations like Brussels). It is a small student city; every 3rd resident is a student. The ultimate way to move around is by bike, so get yourself a cheap rental bike from Velo. Be prepared for a culture shock if you come from Vienna: car drivers are actually friendly and watch out for you on your bike, it's amazing. Everything in the city centre is within walking distance, but campus Arenberg – where most technical and natural science faculties are – is a bit further away. Arenberg park is a highlight of the city, with the nice little castle in its centre. Ladeuzeplein with the old university library and Oude Markt are the places to be.

Belgians are not too dissimilar to Austrians. They are friendly but not very open towards foreigners, they like their peace and quiet. The only Belgians I talked to a lot were my study colleagues. In smaller study programmes like mine, it was easy to get in touch. In bigger programmes with hundreds of students, Belgians also tend to keep to themselves, I heard.

2. Accommodation

Start your search early, don't be too picky, and bring money. Finding accommodation in Leuven is tough to nearly impossible. Try Facebook groups. The university's own student accommodations are not nearly up for demand. Good landlords have a "Kotlabel" in green or blue on the house that guarantees good living standards and safety. You don't have to be in the centre of Leuven, Heverlee for example is close by and even closer to the campus. There is a detailed website of KU Leuven on accommodation.

3. Costs and expenses

My room was very expensive (650€/month all in) but big, renovated and with a private bathroom and nice shared kitchen. There are cheaper options like shared flats without a private bathroom, or still more expensive studios with private bathroom and kitchen.

Grocery prices are similar to Austria, but food prices in restaurants are way more expensive (drinks are similar again). For takeaway/fast food, the cheapest and most Belgian thing to do is to go to a Frituur and get some traditional fries and other fried treats.

Mobility is cheap if you get a second-hand bike for rent and make use of the discounted train tickets.



4. Arrival and departure (mean of transport)

From Vienna, there are day and night connections via train (day connection via Frankfurt, night connection direct). You can go to Brussels and take a train back to Leuven, or go to Liège and take a connection to Leuven from there. If you have to fly, Brussels International Airport is far more convenient than Chaleroi Airport, as there is a direct train from that airport to Leuven that takes under 15 minutes.

5. Other (visa, insurance, etc.)

As an Austrian EU citizen, you do not have to worry about visas or insurance. Take the e-card and your passport/Personalausweis and you're fine. Most phone contracts also work in EU countries, so you do not have to get a new tariff or SIM-card, but check with your provider.

6. Description of host university

KU Leuven is high in most university rankings and I understand why. The organisation works smoothly and you'll find every possible information on the website, and if not, the Erasmus and student coordinators reply to emails in no time. The courses are mostly high in quality (also meaning they are not exactly easy) and the teaching staff is mostly professional and nice.

Everything is very much based on faculties. They are your family, and there are rivalries with other faculties. Find out which faculty (the "kring") your programme belongs to and check their website, their events and where their faculty bar is. If you're a runner, take part in the 24-hours run and bring glory to your faculty. If you're not, go anyway, it's the event of the year (happening each October).

KU Leuven offers a free language course to Erasmus students to learn Dutch, something I can definitely recommend. The course is worth 4 ECTS and for German speakers, this language is very intuitive.

Sports offer: for Erasmus students, the university sports card is free, which means you can do all kinds of courses (from football to hip hop dancing) and use the swimming pool for free.

7. Application and enrollment formalities and orientation phase

BOKU has an Erasmus agreement with the bioscience faculty. As I wanted to do mobility subjects, I wanted to go to the faculty of engineering science instead, as they offer a master's programme called "Mobility and Supply Chain Engineering". The Erasmus coordinators of both faculties kindly agreed to letting me come to this faculty instead to do my specialisation subjects. If you are in the same situation, just ask.

Application and enrolment were easy enough. KU Leuven organises a welcome week for Erasmus students where all necessary steps are explained in detail, and where you can meet others before the semester starts. I recommend going to some of the events they organise in this week to find friends and get all formalities sorted.



8. Course offer and attended courses (short description and possibly grading)

I did all possible subjects in the Mobility and Supply Chain Engineering master's offered in the winter semester:

- Public Transportation, Design and Management: easily my favourite, great professor, guest lectures from doctoral students presenting their work, overview of public transport systems and all their aspects, no exam but a research report to analyse a public transport system ourselves.
- Traffic Engineering: by far the hardest course, especially if you don't have a bachelor's degree in engineering (but it was also hard for my Belgian colleagues who did the engineering bachelor). Still learnt a lot. Prof. Tampère is strict and makes the hardest exams. Still glad I took it, even though I did not pass.
- Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS): lecture plus very challenging group project. Great for programmers who want to try things out. I am not good at programming, so I needed group members who are, but with splitting up workloads it was fine in the end. Again, Prof. Tampère's course, so the exam is not to be underestimated.
- Freight Transport Management: lecturers were not university professors but externals, and it showed. Their lecture was less academic and in my opinion not enough factual. As Belgium (especially the port of Antwerp) plays such a big role in freight transport, it was interesting to hear about the Belgian perspective, but I think the professors for freight transport at BOKU work more scientifically, which I prefer. Very easy exam.
- Transport Infrastructure Planning and Appraisal: my second favourite. Awesome professor, who works in different public sector institutions and gives insights into first-hand planning experience.

9. "Study workload" (ECTS) per semester + grading

As I only did the mobility subjects offered, I only did 23 ECTS including the Dutch course. Especially the group project for ITS took so much time that I would not recommend taking much more ECTS.

Grading is insanely strict. If you pass, that's very good. The grading system goes from 20 to 0, you pass if you have 10 or more points. No one ever gets 20 points, and 19 are so rare that each year there are only a few 19s in the whole university.

10. Academic counseling/support

There are offers for mental health/study choice/other forms of counselling from KU, students can also turn to their Ombudsperson in confidence.

11. Tips and summary

Go to a cantus! Preferably one of your faculty, not the ones of ESN, such that there is at least a chance of some Belgians being there too. They can teach you the songs and procedures, it's very much a learning by doing experience (a cantus is a Belgian tradition of singing songs and drinking beer with some small funny rituals). Make sure to not have a lecture in the morning the next day though.



The Belgian train company is called NMBS. If you're under 25, get the Student Multi ticket Leuven-Brussels, which is very cheap, and you'll probably go to Brussels multiple times anyway. And/or get the Youth Multi to go anywhere in Belgium. If over 25, you can still make use of the weekend offers, which are usually half price on a return ticket.

Explore Flemish artists at the museums in Brussels, Gent, and Antwerp. They are internationally renowned for a reason.

Take the free Dutch (Flemish) course for Erasmus students!

Go to Pangea, the international student hangout place, for coffee and events.

Your faculty might have its own wiki page with course descriptions.