

Additional information for American candidates applying to the Faculty of Theology to explain to them some of the differences between studying in America and in Leuven



On the academic environment:

As you might expect, studying in Europe is not the same as studying in other parts of the world. Indeed, contemplating these differences is an important factor in Leuven's theological scene because so many of the students here come from all over the world, and hence from many diverse educational backgrounds. Unifying such diversity under one pedagogical system is no easy task! One immediately noticed difference is the contrast between the styles of learning and evaluation, which in North America tend toward reading assignments and written examinations.

As with other European universities, Leuven tends more toward auditory (e.g. lectures and group discussions) and oral evaluations (most courses have an oral exam as the only evaluation). In this sense, you will notice an added stress placed upon the general comprehension of a particular field (or subfield) of study in favor of a knowledge of facts based on specific (written) materials. This in no way, however, indicates that learning takes place here at a remove from the close reading of texts; indeed, the faculty here strives for close readings among its many research ventures and publications, and it has one of the top theology libraries in the world! What it does indicate is that conferences, congresses, symposia and colloquia are all moved to the forefront of the educational experience, immersing each student in an ongoing discussion that pulls them 'from the sidelines' and into the game. This difference, in effect, often brings together a wide variety of international scholarship and persons, social networking, and the like, versus presenting itself as an isolated, individual approach to learning. Indeed, there are an abundance of conferences held directly in Leuven itself, as well as many prominent guest speakers who travel here, offering Leuven's various international contacts as a big advantage of studying here.

In addition to using different sized paper (A4 instead of 'letter'), the academic calendar runs according to a more European styled division with classes running from the end of September right up till Christmas, an exam period lasting the month of January and into February, and then a second semester lasting from then until the end of May, with exams again lasting around a month. Unlike in North America where you generally make preparations in advance for the upcoming academic year (e.g. registering for classes, shopping for textbooks, 'reading ahead', etc), students don't register here until shortly before (or after!) classes have begun, making use of an efficient online system of registration (the 'Individual Study Program', or ISP) to assist them. And, in general, all course materials can be purchased in a course notes shop which doesn't open until after classes have started.

Essentially, courses here present the fruits of ongoing research and dialogue, while simultaneously giving students some space to develop their own lines of thought. Practically, most students here study in English with it being their second or third language. This certainly presents an advantage for native-English speaking North American students in some respects; it also presents opportunities for growth in taking the time, in central Europe, to learn Flemish (Dutch), French, German, Spanish, Italian or any other of the almost endless list of languages that Leuven offers through its language centers. Essentially, as regards the theology program, each student begins to learn in community, or in groups and ideally or at best in close relation with your promoter. This method is intended to reward the individual interests of students without isolating them within a tiny world of research. At the masters level, this translates into a broad range of theses written from a number of contextual perspectives. At the doctoral level, the program expands upon this theme, allowing researchers to deeply pursue their studies, in sharp contrast with the North American system which is often experienced through a steady dose of coursework and a series of comprehensive exams at the end.

Leuven presents a system where you are rewarded for your own initiative, left to set your own academic agenda and given the room to grow.

On living in Leuven:

Stereotypes usually express a truth of some kind, and Belgium's love for chocolates, waffles, beers and *frites* is no exception! Leuven is situated in the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium and it certainly reflects its heritage as a major European university town. In this sense, the university does not house a centralized 'campus', but is rather spread out over the whole town, occupying buildings both medieval and contemporary. As you might expect, Leuven is often rated high on the scales of European diversity with a large array of culture present in its many annual festivals, theaters, cafes, quality restaurants (i.e. Belgian and European cuisines, an ethnic variety, a vegetarian sensibility, etc) and the like. Leuven is conveniently located just outside of Brussels (very close to Brussels International Airport/Luchthaven) and within easy reach of most major European cities, making holiday travel that much more appealing (though you'll have to budget for those sometimes necessary trips back to North America!). The wide array of open air markets and fresh produce also make for a convivial atmosphere in which to live and study.

Leuven is a fully functional bicycle city, with separate lanes open for bikes on nearly every major road. Living without a car can actually be a convenience and a way to avoid hassles like parking and the increase in cost of living. Leuven is generally a very affordable city as well, its size making commuting from all of the surrounding regions (e.g. Kessel-Lo, Heverlee) very easy. Additionally to note, Belgium is a socialized country, so health insurance and your basic social service needs are well attended to.

As you might have already noticed, the costs of studying in Leuven are very low, with tuition fees being kept to a minimum. Combined with the relatively low cost of student living (i.e. no car needed, affordable housing and dining, low insurance and health costs, etc), this fact alone might be enough to tempt any student from North America to give Leuven a closer inspection! In general, the costs for course texts are *significantly* less, the living costs are very reasonable (in most cases, such as food and travel, easily equivalent), and housing expenses can actually be less than you might be accustomed to, depending of course on where you choose to live. If you are interested in a student job, which can be had with a limit of 20 hours maximum per week, these can be arranged by contacting the student employment office, or the faculty secretariat's office if you are interested in editing academic texts, a key job in Leuven for native English speakers. In addition to the standard student loans for which you are no doubt eligible, funding can also be sought through the faculty's offices for international students who might be in need. Interested prospective students can contact the admissions secretary for more information (admissions@theo.kuleuven.be).

Typically, most students find a place to live on their own, outside the university structure, with many students arriving in Leuven to find housing on their own in early or mid September. Most of Belgium, so it seems, goes on vacation in August, thus making it easier to wait until after the standard holiday period before trying to get situated here.

Websites for more information

The Faculty of Theology, K.U.Leuven,

<http://theo.kuleuven.be/page/en>

The City of Leuven,

www.leuven.be

Leuven tourist information,

www.trabel.com/leuven/leuven.htm

www.visitflanders.co.uk/go/destinations/leuven-intro.html

www.visitflanders.us/index.php?page=leuven

Leuven online,

www.leuven.com

Belgian rail

www.b-rail.be/main/E/