Diversity challenge

With new thinking on prayer, food and religious holidays, KU Leuven hopes to attract more students of foreign origin

The University of Leuven recently decided to drop the “Catholic” from its name, but it still retains the “K” (for Katholiek) in its official name of KU Leuven. With that affirmation of its Catholic identity, the university also took the opportunity to clarify its attitude towards religious and philosophical diversity.

In a recent memorandum, KUL addresses students’ practical concerns, such as the possibility to adjust exam schedules because of recognised religious holidays. Furthermore, the university promises more prayer and reflection spaces, a new contact point for religious matters and is exploring the possibilities of providing halal and kosher meals.

Flemish students with a foreign background still constitute a small minority at KUL, but they and the increasing number of international students often pose questions about the university’s diversity policy at the help desk for students of foreign origin. Many Jewish students, for instance, ask for exemptions or to move lessons and tests because of religious holidays or rest days, according to Saloua Belahrir of the help desk.

“The memorandum states that the university respects such concerns, but teachers have the personal freedom to grant or deny permission,” explains Tine Baelmans, vice-rector for student affairs and diversity policy. “Exam schedules can be adapted if students apply for this in time.”

Halal and kosher

As Islam has only two recognised holidays here – Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan, and the Sacrifice Feast – Muslim students don’t make such demands. But the university accepts the wearing of headscarves and offers single-sex residences for female students during the length of their academic careers. In the past, girls-only housing was
only available to firstyear students. Interrupting exams to pray is prohibited because of organisational difficulties, however. “It’s important not to avoid sensitive issues and to give unambiguous answers,” explains Belahrir.

For all ideologies, KUL will provide more spaces for prayer and reflection, and a new contact point for specific religious concerns is being set up. The university is examining the feasibility of offering meals in accordance with religious prescriptions – halal food in Islam and Jewish kosher meals – at its student restaurant Alma.

Sanghmitra Bhutani, education expert of the Minderhedenforum, the Flemish umbrella organisation for ethnic cultural minorities, feels the memorandum serves as an example for other Flemish universities and colleges. She is particularly satisfied with the commitment of KUL to mediate when students experience problems in finding an internship because they wear religious symbols such as a headscarf. “Religious symbols are often an issue that hinders students in their search for good internships. It’s crucial that the university supports the students.”

Role models

With its policy document, the university hopes to remove perceived obstacles for students of foreign origin in secondary school who view the KUL as a “white bastion … This shows our openness and respect for their cultural backgrounds,” says Baelmans, “and hopefully it can take away some anxieties about being accepted here.” The university already puts much effort into attracting more students from Flanders with a foreign background. An advisor informs schools and associations about the KUL’s diversity policy, and postgraduate students with a foreign background function as ambassadors by sharing their experiences with secondary school pupils. “These personal testimonies have a big impact on the younger students,” explains Baelmans. Bhutani agrees: “It’s important for these students to have role models.”

A room of one’s own

From their inscription on, new students of foreign origin can rely on the advice of older students. There are associations for, among others, students of Turkish, Maghreb and Middle Eastern origin. “These groups are especially important in making them feel welcome in the first month,” says Baelmans. “They make the process of integration much easier.”

But the student associations also have an important role during the length of their academic careers, says Abdurrahman Dönmez, chairman of the Turkish Student Association Leuven (TSL). The TSL was formed in 2006 and counts about 50 members. “We form a close-knit group of friends with the same cultural baggage, and we understand specific issues that some are struggling with. It’s also nice to speak in Turkish with each other; language is essential for everyone’s identity.”
The TSL has good contacts with the university’s student associations made up of Flemish students and takes part in KUL student activities, such as the annual 24-hour running event. Students of Flemish and other origins are also present at Turkish activities, such as the barbecue to celebrate the Sacrifice Feast.

Still, it’s a big step to join a Flemish student association. Dönmez participated in several activities of Flemish associations in his first academic year, but felt better in the Turkish TSL: “The atmosphere is also good in Flemish associations, but for Muslims a cantus [party involving lots of singing and drinking], for example, is not much fun, since we don’t drink alcohol.”

The TSL also helps put future students and their parents at ease. “For girls and their parents, the availability of single-sex housing is frequently crucial in the choice for Leuven. For boys, there are fewer issues, although my mother was a little worried whether I would be able to eat halal meals.”

Dönmez is happy with the extra facilities that the new memorandum promises and hopes this is the beginning of more action. “It’s a good measure to provide more prayer places on the campus because the mosque in the city centre is not always easy to visit between lessons. But the TSL also needs its own room to organise activities or at least one shared with other associations for students of foreign origin.”

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