

Cultural Differences

Exam styles hint at the underlying approaches to education.

By ToTran Nguyen

I recently caught up with Vice Rector of International Policy, Bart De Moor. He had just returned from his trip to the US, where he negotiated an institutional agreement between KU Leuven and the University of Illinois. Some students may know him better as a professor in the Faculty of Engineering. Given his effort in constructing a network of international universities in different parts of the world, THE VOICE was curious to know what cultural differences in education he has observed in his work and travels.



Photo courtesy of Bart De Moor

TN: Based on your experience in education across various regions, what differences in philosophies or attitudes towards education have you observed? How is this reflected in the education infrastructure?

BDM: Maybe it's too simplistic what I'm going to say, but nevertheless it might be a good first observation. If you move from the East to the West, so from China to Leuven to America, I think there are several gradients (as we call it in the sciences), several differences that you can observe. For instance, in China, if you look at the teaching method, it is quite normal [to have] big groups. In Leuven we still have that but we also have sometimes a mixture of large groups and small groups. If you go over to England (Cambridge and Oxford) and to America, I have the impression that the teaching is more based on almost individual tutoring, not always, but you do see smaller groups

more often. I think Leuven is somewhere in between China and the West, let's say America.

TN: I've noticed that professor-student relationships at KU Leuven seem to be on the more formal end of the spectrum.

BDM: I think I can agree. It's not as formal as in China, but I think it is more formal than in America. The same observation applies for evaluations. If you look in China, you have real formal exams. For instance, in order to access the university system, there is a national entrance examination. At KU Leuven, we also have formal exams although that can already differ a bit, because if you are doing engineering, then you have more homework assignments and projects. There are about 13 Belgian students from KU Leuven spending a quarter in Illinois. I asked them about the

evaluation method. It was almost all based on assignments, homework and projects, so there are almost no formal exams. They don't have something like the oral examinations.

TN: I can imagine that. I think for myself coming from the US, the oral exams were quite a surprise.

BDM: Of course what I'm saying is a general hypothesis, that there is a kind of gradient if you go from the East to Europe to America. There is a difference in the culture of teaching and the culture of evaluation, and I think KU Leuven is a kind of mixture of these two cultures. In the past, not so long ago, we had a very formal teaching system and a very formal examination system. When I was a student 30 years ago, we had very big classes of several hundred students in all the courses, and all the exams were concentrated in June and July. And these were formal oral exams. That was one generation ago. It's already changed a lot. We have more exam periods, more assignments, and maybe more emphasis on creativity. However, I think our system is still based a lot on reproduction. It is evolving in the direction of the American system, but still, it's a mixture of the old system and the newer system.

TN: Are you implying that you find education in the US to be more focused on critical, higher order thinking?

BDM: Indeed. Creativity, writing papers, guidance by teaching assistants, and so on, is more oriented in the US towards developing one's own assertiveness and ideas.

TN: Coming to KU Leuven, I have observed more openness to critical examination of dominant ideas.

BDM: Do you think that KU Leuven students are more critical than in the US?

TN: Well, whether they are more critical or not, I think that the environment here is more open to criticism of ideas. In the US, although assertiveness is valued more, it can be more difficult (than it is here) to be assertive about one's alternative views that are, let's say, anti-capitalistic.

BDM: When I teach in America, I always appreciate very much that students are very assertive and very open. They ask a lot of questions. They interact a lot with the teachers. You never end with the material that you intended. While at KU Leuven, typically, students are very quiet and they seem to take everything you say without too much criticism, at least in the [classroom]. I think the level of interaction is less here than in the US, in my experience.

TN: I would certainly agree with that. I was alluding more to the case where a student with more Marxist ideas submitted a paper... In my experience, I think the response from the professor might be quite different in the US versus here.

BDM: So you mean going against the ruling paradigm. In that sense, I think Europe is maybe a little bit more

consensus-based. I allude here to a very interesting observation by the American Ambassador in Brussels. Last year, he opened his talk here with a statement that, in his opinion, Belgium is the most unified country in the world. Of course, the whole audience was very surprised, because we think of Belgium as a country where there are many different opinions, where there are many problems between North and South, and so forth. But he claimed the opposite in the sense that the intolerance for differences in opinion is much larger in America than it is in Europe in general.

I think maybe that is something that correlates with what you said about how we are more open to dissenting opinions. If you can argue for why you think something, then it's acceptable. It's not necessary that the professor agrees, but you have to defend yourself. And maybe the professor is open to the dissenting opinion provided you argue well.

TN: How might the different funding structure of universities in, let's say, the US versus some European countries affect the education approach? In the US, the student is often seen as the 'customer'.

BDM: At first thought, I would say I don't really see any impact of the funding system on the level of teaching. Maybe the quality control in American universities has an older tradition. When I was doing a postdoc at Stanford about 20 years ago, the professors there already had a regular evaluation of their teaching performance, both by the university and by the students. And it played a role in their promotion and career. I think in Europe, we have only recently introduced such a quality control system, but it's not very strict. Still lots of work to do there. Maybe the funding system in America has forced this quality control because students pay a big tuition fee, and of course, they tend to get quality in return. That has only started recently at KU Leuven. It hasn't been for longer than 10 years that professors here have been evaluated regularly on an individual basis.

TN: And is there any influence from potential employers?

BDM: On the one hand, here in Europe and especially in Belgium, we insist on academic freedom, which basically means that the university and the professors decide on the content of the courses. We are very much a kind of supply-driven university, in the sense that the professors determine the content of courses. At this moment, I have the impression that other stakeholders, such as the employers, don't have any input at all in the content of courses. I personally would prefer that there be a little bit more interaction between the stakeholders in society and the people that define the content of the courses. The ultimate decision of the content should still lie with the university and faculty.

TN: Last question, do you have any tips or advice for international students who are coming here from different education systems? Any comforting words to help them through the anxieties of the different education approach?

BDM: My main advice would be to try to talk to the local students, because they know the culture. They know the advantages and disadvantages. They know the benefits and the risks. It's my impression that students coming from abroad could gain quite a lot by really talking to local students from the beginning. By "local", I mean the students from Flanders who have been educated in the system here.

However, our students should also be more open to foreign students, because as a vice rector, I'm a little bit concerned about the relatively large distance between our local students and those coming from abroad. Sometimes there is a sort of segregation, when students only interact with their own kind. We need to really invest in what we call "interculturality". We have taken some measures to stimulate that. The effort should come both from the local students and the students here from abroad, especially when it is about the teaching system and the evaluation system. I think they know very little about each other in that respect, and they can learn quite a lot if they start interacting on that, among other things, from the first day on.

TN: Actually, the theme for our February issue will be the internationalization effort at KU Leuven, so I'm sure we will be in touch. Thank you.

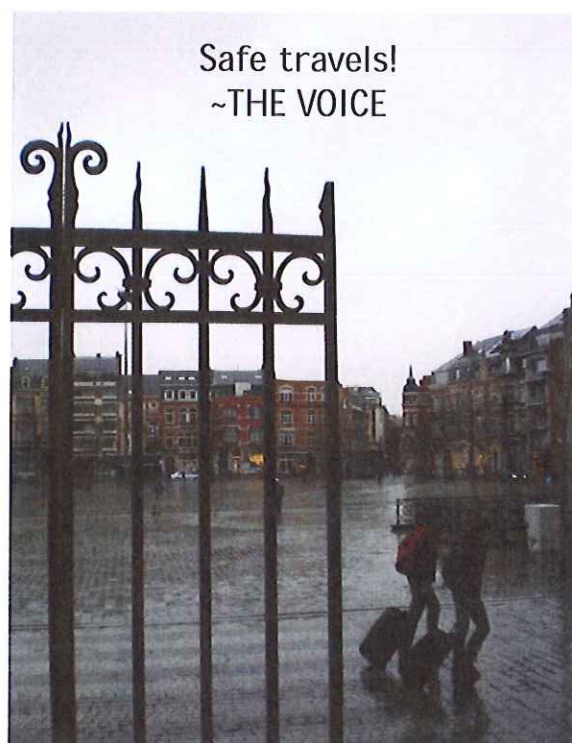


Photo courtesy of Sara Rich

What Have You Found Surprising About Exams at KUL?

"When I lived in America, school started earlier in the day and as a result, it ended in the early afternoon. In the States there are also a lot more choices in electives! Here in Belgium, it's more academic with less creative courses. For example, in the States you could be part of the band or orchestra, or even part of the choir. I also noticed that in the States, I barely had to study for my classes and I would still pass them with flying colors. Here in Belgium the education level is quite high, they expect you to know a lot more."

~American student studying photography

"There's a lot of pressure from my parents, classmates, and teachers to get the highest scores on tests and exams. We have to study a lot all the time. When I came to Belgium I saw that students don't worry as much about having the highest points in the class, but were more concerned about just passing the exams. Belgian students are more satisfied with just passing the exams than back in Vietnam. They also like to go to parties more and drink a lot of alcohol."

~Vietnamese student studying electronic engineering

"First of all, there is a big culture shock when arriving here in Belgium. Students here like to party a lot and drink a lot. They spend less time studying during the semester and as a result they cram everything for the exams a few weeks or even days before the exams. It is completely different than in China. Chinese students are constantly studying throughout the year. We don't go out partying or drinking alcohol; after the school day is finished we continue studying in our dorm rooms."

~Chinese student studying biochemical engineering

"If you've studied in the Anglo-Saxon model, Belgium is a shock. When I thought I would get a failing grade, I got a high one, and when I expected a high one, I got a low one. One thing that I don't like here is that not attending class doesn't mean that you're going to miss anything. Where I went to school, much of the learning happens in the classroom. The system in Iran is based on the American model because it was designed in the 1960's."

~Iranian student studying anthropology

"At my home university, you never do oral exams for modules, and exams finish earlier, so I don't have to study during Christmas and New Year's. Here, most of my exams are oral exams, and I will be studying during the Christmas holidays."

~Irish student studying social sciences