

Leuven as potential **European Capital of Culture 2030**:

Strategies to include needs and changing cultural preferences of international residents over time.

Leuven as city with a strong international footprint that oftentimes extends to its cultural sector aims to candidate as European Capital of Culture (ECOC) in 2030. This inspiring proposal allowed a research team from KU Leuven to contribute to the city's preparation strategy. In cooperation with the City Hall Leuven, the project focused on a more exhaustive overview of the needs of communities residing in Leuven and their changing cultural preferences over time. This approach took into account comments and proposals of the cultural stakeholders as well as the residents themselves and their ideas upon best strategies of increasing one's inclusion in the cultural scene. In addition, best practices and lessons learned of the internationally-rich city of Groningen were collected as exemplary case of sustainable minority integration in culture. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the final research results were presented virtually at Leuven's Arts Advisory Board meeting in March 2020 with the potential to serve as a strong catalyst for the city's cultural strategy in future and with special regard to the candidacy as ECOC 2030.

Introduction

As cities around the world converge, becoming gradually more similar to one another in sight, it becomes increasingly important to examine the factors contributing to the development of a city's competitive edge and increasing its attractiveness in the eyes of its inhabitants and visitors alike. Students of Cultural Studies unanimously position culture among the high ranks of such catalysts, highlighting with their academic and professional devotion the immaterial potential ingrained in experiencing culture.

Leuven's strong creative field holds vast potential not only as a unique melting pot of diverse and creative productions, but also as a tool of aggregate unification and integration. In view of the city's ambition to candidate as ECOC 2030, Paraskevi Malisioti, Megija Milberga and Anna Pühr, Cultural Studies students and internationals in Leuven themselves, conducted a thorough research with the purpose of understanding the cultural preferences of the international communities residing in Leuven so as to boost their integration into the city's cultural activities.

In addition to developing a deeper understanding of diverse communities, best practices and lessons learned of the city of Groningen – an exemplary case of sustainable minority integration in culture¹ – were examined to assist the efforts of the municipality to expand its cultural spectatorship and vocalise the brand of the city.

¹ Internationalisation for sustainable future: Groningen. URBACT, accessed 15 October 2020.

This paper gives an overview of the objectives, methodology and results of the research project in order to reach an increasing understanding of the potential to include a city's international audience in activities foreseen with regards to a possible ECOC program and beyond. Although the worldwide pandemic of this year will certainly concern us a bit longer than 2020 which can lead to ongoing travel restrictions and a re-thinking of future ECOC programs, it is to be hoped that an ECOC 2030 strategy can be planned within a framework of "normality" that also aims at attracting international tourists. In any case, including international residents culturally-wise can be seen as desired goal for any city's strategy for a common flourishing, diverse cultural scene.

1. Mapping the Status Quo for Defining the Way Ahead

The application for nominating Leuven as European Capital of Culture for the year 2030 must be submitted in 2024. When the team first consulted with representatives from the City Hall and KU Leuven, their common aspiration for the project lied in the long-term horizon and positive spillovers for sustainable cultural activation of the region and the various communities inhabiting it. Building on the paramount aim of developing, realising and evaluating Leuven's cultural lead in 2030 as a catalyst for future endeavours rather than an isolated event, the research team highlighted the necessity of executing preparatory groundwork, particularly in the field of understanding the faces of culture in the city today.

In the first meeting with Hannes Vanhaverbeke, representative of the City Hall's Culture Department, all parties could share their ideas and views on the potential outlook of the project, taking into account that the ECOC plan should prove useful even in the case of a non-successful application. Moreover, it was required to reflect on possible topics, events and structures in order to examine how they meet the ECOC requirements as well as the local cultural policy plans (in the fields of sustainability, inclusion, internationalisation, etc.). The groundwork, carried out via in-depth interviews with culture providers and surveys with international culture consumers, aided to fill the former void of knowledge concerning the patterns of culture consumption among the population of international residents.

The initial discussions allowed to obtain a clearer image of what would be needed and what can potentially be achieved. Having consulted with the key stakeholders involved in advancing the application process, the final research question of the project asked how to increase the participation of Leuven-based internationals in the city's cultural activities. To find answers, the team set forward the following aims:

- provide groundwork for the sections of the city's application concerning the integration of Leuven's international communities in the set of cultural activities taking place in 2030 and beyond;

- deliver a clear and easily replicable methodology to enable further expansion of the research project in the future;
- map the culture consumption preferences of international residents in Leuven by examining their preferred means of communication and event formats;
- provide a set of recommendations for an increasing international attendance for cultural events taking place in Leuven.

Natalie De Filette, representative of the International House Leuven, was the first advocate of the relevance of the initiated research as it “took on an undiscovered path”. Furthermore, the intrinsic value of the project was the reliability of its results as the research design repeatedly emphasised the quest for tailor-made solutions and recommendations, relevant particularly to the targeted audience. One aspect of the investigation concerned the collection of best practices already employed by various cultural institutions in Leuven, which is a well-known strategy for gathering expertise and insights for increasing audience participation. However, instead of closing the analysis there, a subsequent step was included that involved consulting directly with the international community. In other words, the created survey worked as a direct link between the target audience and the team members of the project, avoiding a biased representation delivered by a third party (in this case – the cultural institutions).

The team was the first entity to carry out a research on cultural integration of internationals in Leuven, collecting the preferences, consumption habits, interests and recommendations of the diverse community in Leuven. Thus, the findings can be seen as extremely beneficial and relevant in the city's overall effort to map the international scene.

2. Analysing Both Sides of a (Cultural) Coin

In order to reach the high bar set initially, which involved delivering a set of easily interpretable, replicable and applicable results, it was necessary to consult literature upon creating the most suitable research design for the stated purpose. In order to map the culture consumption patterns of long-term international residents in Leuven, it was decided to divide the analysis in three stages:

1. Interviews – Supply Side

Acknowledging the relatively small sample of cultural institutions in Leuven, it was decided to conduct in-depth interviews with representatives from the supply side of cultural content providers in Leuven. These insights allowed to obtain a comprehensive outlook on the set of activities taking place in the field at the moment, as well as provide a basis for questions to be further included in the survey, allowing to diminish the gaps of knowledge observed among culture producers in attracting international audience.

The sample of addressed interviewees was formed by following a snowball sampling approach. Snowball sampling envisages a non-probability sampling technique where existing members of the sample refer to future members of the sample, thus the size of the sample increases proportionately to time spent in contact with the members of the sample (Goodman 1961). It is a beneficial approach in situations when one is examining hidden populations and populations that are hard to define (Voicu and Babonea, 2011). The research team was eager to employ snowball sampling to include unconventional initiatives and show potentially innovative approaches in minority integration. Research states that the basis for the list of questions ought to be derived from the research question of the project, which was how to increase the participation of Leuven-based internationals in the city's cultural activities.

II. Survey Demand Side

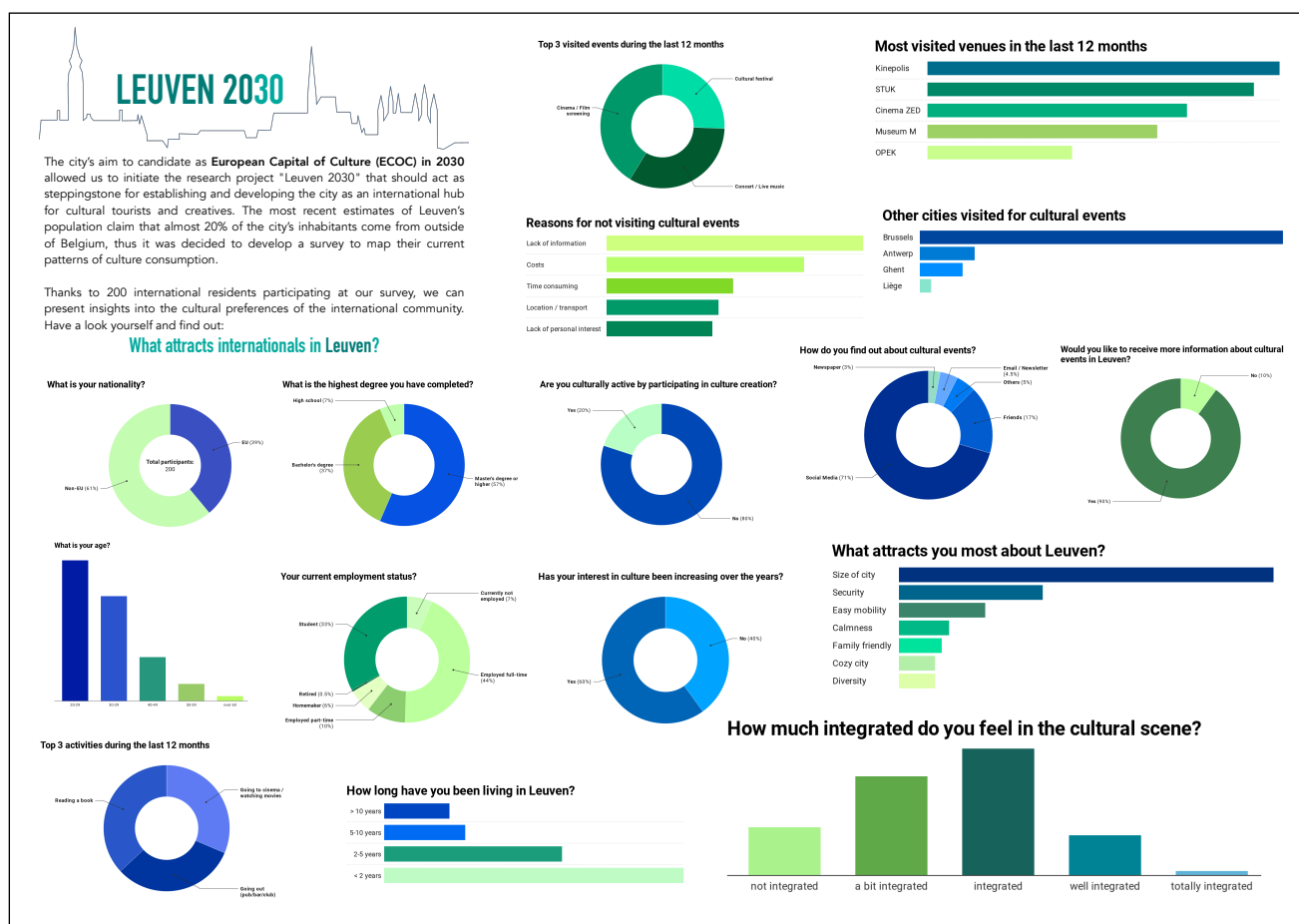


Figure 1. Survey Results "Leuven 2030", Source: Authors Archive

In order to deliver an exhaustive snapshot of the cultural scene, it was necessary to connect with the demand side or consumers of culture, with a particular focus on long-term international residents. The most recent estimates of Leuven's population claim that almost 20% of the city's inhabitants come from outside of Belgium (Brinkhoff 2020), thus it was decided to develop a survey to map their current patterns of culture consumption and shed light onto pockets of

opportunity for their further inclusion. The set of problematic aspects identified in the survey were then analysed by successfully employing the framework of developing participation in the arts introduced by RAND (1999).

The survey aimed at illustrating the culture consumption patterns of Leuven-based people living or working in Leuven. In order to gather responses, the research team employed the simple random sampling method. Simple random sampling (SRS) is a sampling design in which each member of the target population holds an equal probability of being selected for the sample (Meng 2013). This method is employed due to the clear definition and size of the target population. The survey was distributed in online communities on Facebook as they were recommended as the most appropriate medium by the International House Leuven. In order to ensure the diversity of the sampled population, the team handed out surveys to internationals working in shops and restaurants in Leuven, as well as sent them to HR departments for internal distribution at the largest employers of foreign nationals.

The RAND model identifies four stages of an individual's decision to participate in culture: a predisposition reflecting the individual's background, an individual's perceptions, practical considerations about participating in the arts and the nature of an individual's actual experience (Connolly and Cady 2001). Combining these four stages it is possible to provide a framework for distinguishing among four different types of arts participants (McCarthy and Jinnett 1999) see figure 2.

		What person seeks	
		Entertainment	Fulfillment
Participation preference	Developing proficiency (self-focused)	Participation through media	Hands-on participation
	Social experience	Attendance (casual)	Attendance (aficionado)

Figure 2. Framework Explaining Forms of Participation, Source: RAND, 1999

The team examined the culture consumers in Leuven within the framework developed by RAND in order to position them within a particular strand of cultural participation, as a group. The subsequent analysis would provide not only insightful knowledge on the culture consumption patterns of the international residents so far, but also allow institutions to cater their programme to the demands of this audience. Research clarified that these forms are not mutually exclusive and that participants from each group can easily navigate further, the lesson in this distribution

lies in focusing the attention of the content (culture) providers towards keeping in mind their audience when developing both the program and the subsequent outreach strategy (ibid).

Outcomes of the RAND Model have unveiled a dissonance between the cultural content supplied by the culture institutions and the cultural content demanded by residents as results concluded in the following observations:

- culture is perceived as a social experience;
- smaller events with fewer large headlines are desired;
- cultural institutions need to “leave” their houses in order to reach residents;
- culture competes with TV, cinemas and restaurants instead of other cultural institutions;
- desired goal would be that residents develop certain habits of consuming culture.

Further cultural consumption results obtained by the survey are illustrated in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Analysis Results RAND Model, Source: Authors Archive

III. Comparative Analysis

After encountering with the producers and consumers of culture in Leuven, the team conducted the final phase of data collection that stemmed directly from the results obtained in the previous stages. To diminish existing mismatches between the two formerly discussed parties (producers and consumers of culture) and increase the extent of their mutual symbiosis, an exemplary case of sustainable minority integration in culture in the case of Groningen was examined. By interviewing a representative from the City Hall Groningen, possible explanations of the results obtained in the survey were desired as well as best practices and lessons learned shared.

The Municipality of Groningen together with institutions created the cultural platform *Here & Now* which was indicated as outstanding successful solution on how to integrate the international audience. The platform is a recommendation-based cultural agenda with a set of community activities that are aiming at connecting the cultural sector of the city with its international population. It was launched in 2017 as a result of extended research among internationals and cultural organisations in the city and realised within the Internationalisation policy of Akkoord van Groningen. It represents the only online and offline source where internationals can find all formal and informal events in English.

The *Here & Now* team manually gathers and translates all the “language no problem” events and communicates them to Groningen’s international community. The platform highlights significant events on their website, social media, newsletters and makes special event selections that are relevant for internationals. Furthermore, ticket giveaways and activities are organised to attract internationals to new cultural venues and insights of the internationals’ cultural preferences are communicated with stakeholders helping the Municipality to understand the international audience of Groningen and tailor program to their needs. In view of the ongoing pandemic, such platforms provide great opportunities to transfer cultural activities to the virtual world if needed and reach a wide audience of cultural interested residents.

Additional lessons learned by Groningen:

- *artistic value vs. community-approval*: 87% of internationals care about the community’s opinion more than about the pure artistic value of an event;
- *print vs. social media*: internationals almost never react (3%) to event posters or brochures spread around the city – they focus on social media and pay more attention to images of real people (performers, organisers), live streams, vlogs and other “raw content”;
- *curiosity vs. network*: when discovering new venues or events, internationals prefer to be introduced by a friend or are attracted by a very specific topic (e.g. sustainability, A.I., feminism) instead of an event’s title or poster – if that’s not the case, the most preferred way to familiarise with something new is to visit a joint event by two or more organisations, see them at a festival or recommended by an already trusted organisation.

3. Increasing Participation through Communities’ Involvement and Wide-Ranged Events

The overall analysis of all three research stages (Interview, Survey, Comparative Analysis) have resulted in a set of recommendations that the team presented to the City Hall Leuven and relevant cultural stakeholders. The research has received positive reactions and was perceived as a great contribution to the city’s upcoming preparation strategy in view of the ambition to

become ECOC in 2030. The final recommendations to increase the participation of Leuven-based internationals in the city's cultural activities were summarised as follows:

- I. Focus on co-creation, cultural workshops and amateur art practices to encourage citizen's participation.
- II. Directly approach small communities to ask for opinion.
- III. Include focus groups and brainstorm with internationals during project development process for insights and as sense of belonging and co-creation.
- IV. Lowering price is not always crucial factor for going or not going but it is the "fear of unknown" - there are worries of like/dislike event, too awkward to leave, lost money and time investment. It is better to offer multidisciplinary, free events and festivals.
- V. Both, cultural sector and internationals, are interested in connecting with each other - it is recommendable that there's a neutral party (city marketing organisation, project group, municipality) that would research the situation of both parties and create/manage an integral strategy aimed at bringing these two together.
- VI. Internationals are eager to join the cultural life but they often don't feel targeted or included, that's why it's important for the neutral organisation to communicate with both of the parties, informing them about each other and about opportunities that are there (e.g. *Here & Now*).

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