

Scholars and Literati at the University of Douai (1559–1793)

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1 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Douai was one of the great Catholic foundations of the age of confessional division. Created in the Spanish Netherlands under Philip II, with papal authorisation in 1559 and royal letters patent in 1561, it formally opened in 1562 with the five classical faculties: theology, canon law, civil law, medicine, and arts. Douai was not conceived as an ordinary local university, but as a second Catholic university for the Spanish Netherlands, designed to complement and partly mirror the older University of Louvain (Soen et al. 2010; de la Croix and Vitale 2025). In particular, it was intended as a strategic institution for the defence and renewal of Catholic learning on the northern frontier of the Habsburg world.

From the beginning, Douai was not only a university in the narrow sense, but also a dense urban complex of colleges, seminaries, religious houses, and printing activity. The Collège du Roi opened with the university in 1562. It served both as a residence for students and as a place of instruction, especially for the arts curriculum that prepared students for the higher faculties. It was followed by other colleges, most notably the Collège d’Anchin, opened in 1568. It was founded and endowed under the patronage of the Benedictine abbey of Anchin, but its teaching was entrusted to the Jesuits, whose educational expertise made them natural agents of Counter-Reformation schooling. This Jesuit college soon became one of the largest and most influential components of Douai’s academic world.

The same year, 1568, also saw the foundation of the English College by William Allen. Douai was an ideal refuge for English Catholics after the Elizabethan religious settlement (re-establishment of the Church of England as a Protestant national church): it was close to England, firmly Catholic, and equipped with a new university. The English College trained secular priests for the English mission and became famous for its role in the Douay–Rheims Bible. Its New Testament was published during the college’s temporary stay at Rheims in 1582, while the Old Testament appeared at Douai in 1609–1610.

Douai’s history was also shaped by political change. Founded in the Habsburg Netherlands, the town was taken by Louis XIV in 1667 and retained by France after the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1668. The university therefore moved from a Spanish-Habsburg to a French setting, while keeping much of its Catholic and collegiate character. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it remained an important provincial university.

The suppression of the Jesuits in France in the 1760s marked a turning point. The Collège d’Anchin was transformed into a royal college and, in some accounts, merged with or administratively associated with the Collège du Roi. The final rupture came with the French Revolution. The old university and its associated colleges were suppressed in the revolutionary reorganisation of education; the English College closed in 1793, and the old University of Douai effectively disappeared shortly afterwards.

In the nineteenth century, higher education returned in altered form. In 1887, the remaining faculties were transferred to Lille. Thus the University of Lille inherited part of the legacy of Douai.

2 SOURCES

Broad coverage of the professors who taught at Douai can be obtained by combining several sources. First, Soetaert and Soen (2018) cover (published) theologians and philosophers from the foundation of the university to its capture by the French. For the Jesuits, Dehon (1998) provides a very comprehensive list of professors for the period 1635–1765; before 1635, we rely on Sommervogel (1890) to identify the most important figures. Collinet (1900) covers the law faculty. Preux (1867) covers the medicine faculty. Additional names are found in sources relating to other universities. Finally, Herbermann (1913) was useful for identifying the principal figures associated with the English College. Overall, some gaps remain, but the available data are sufficient to draw a consistent picture of the University of Douai.

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. There are 456 scholars in total. The scholars are relatively local: the median distance between their birthplace and Douai is 62 km, except in the first period, when it reaches 141 km. The presence of scholars in Wikipedia and VIAF is high during the first period. It then falls below the average levels reported in (de la Croix 2026), providing a first indication of the university's decline.

Period	no. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1527–1617	94	67%	81.9%	37.1	64.5	141	44.7%	66%
1618–1685	136	61.8%	61.8%	34.2	67.5	46	11%	27.2%
1686–1733	134	80.6%	82.1%	32.4	66.8	34	4.5%	9%
1734–1800	92	75%	72.8%	36.4	67.6	71	8.7%	10.9%
1200–1800	456	71.1%	74.1%	34.6	66.3	62	15.6%	26.5%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

4 FIELDS

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of teaching disciplines, for all scholars on the left and for published scholars on the right. Theology is strongly represented, especially when authors are weighted by their publications. Law is also prominent, while the sciences and medicine play only a minor role.

5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Douai by period. In all four periods, several scholars were born in the British Isles. During the period 1527–1617, many scholars were born in the Low Countries. This pattern is less pronounced in 1618–1685 and disappears altogether in the last two periods. After Douai became French, most of its scholars came from northern and eastern France.

6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index by combining information from VIAF, Wikipedia, and Wikidata using principal component analysis. We also compute the notability of the university at each date by averaging the human capital of the five best scholars

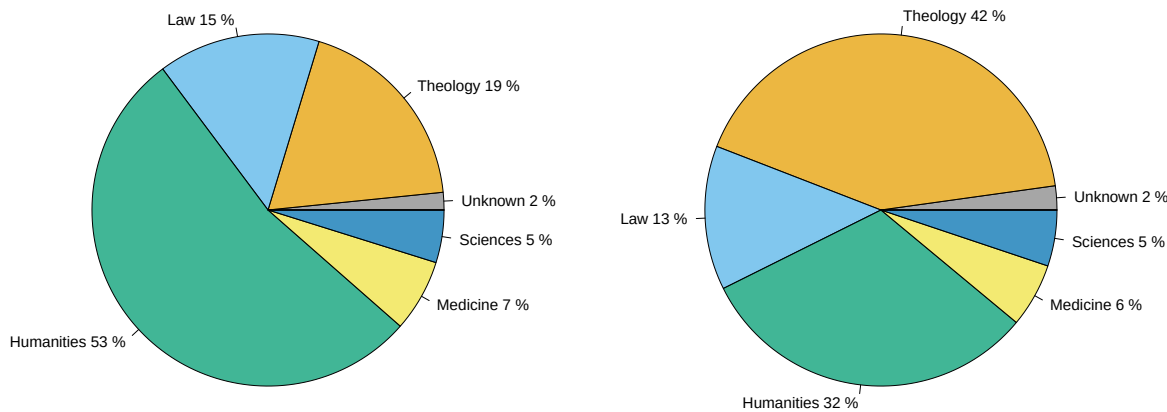


Figure 1: Broad fields at the University of Douai (left: all scholars; right: published scholars)

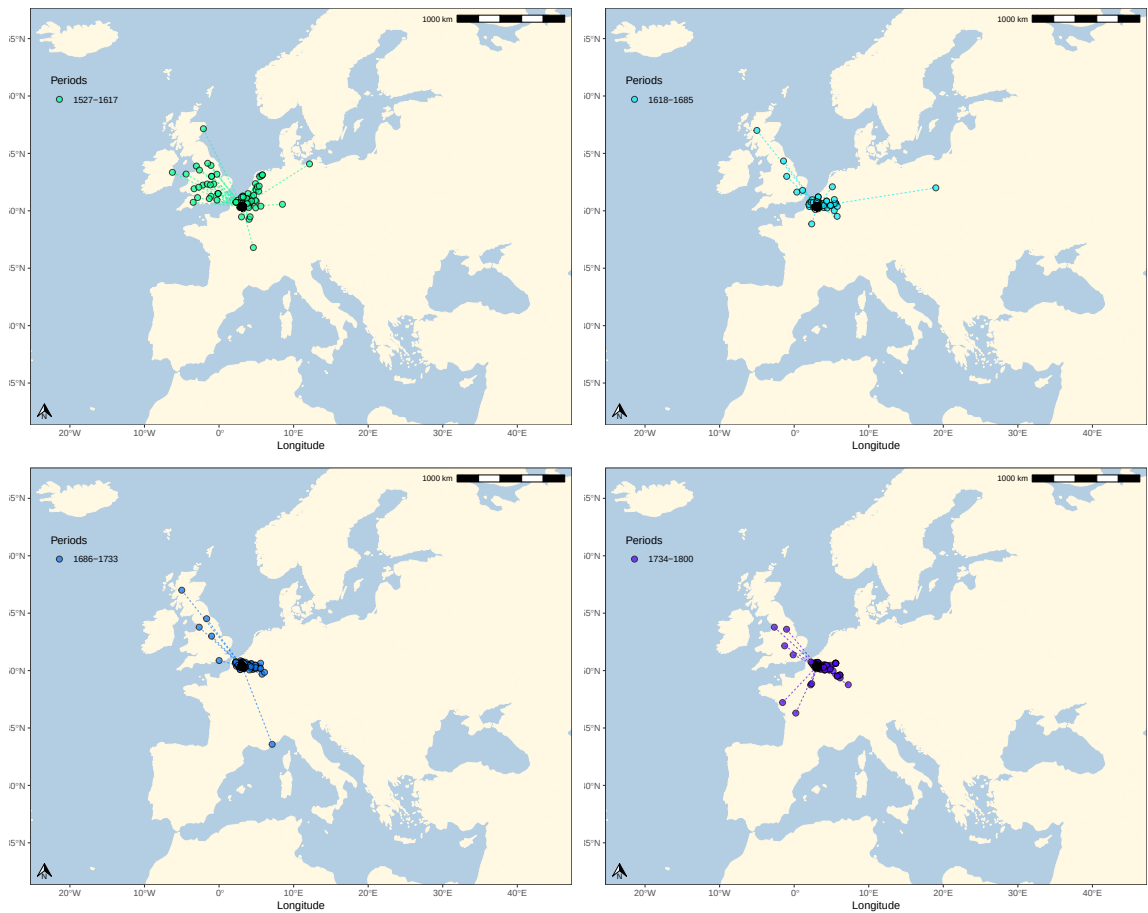


Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Douai

who had been active in Douai during the preceding 25 years. Details are given in de la Croix et al. (2024) (for institutional notability) and Curtis et al. (2026) (for our individual measures of human capital). Figure 3 shows the names of all scholars with a positive human capital index. The orange line displays the notability of the university, based on how well published its leading scholars were.

There is a clear period of intellectual prosperity, from the foundation of the university to about 1650. Both theology and law are represented by many scholars with a high human capital index. The notability generated by these scholars declined rapidly after Douai became French. The figure shows an unexpected spike around 1770, associated with several important figures at the English College.

7 TOP 6 PROFESSORS

We now provide a brief overview of the six professors with the highest human capital index.

Richard Challoner (Lewes 1691 – London 1781) was an English Catholic bishop, theologian, and religious writer who became one of the leading figures of eighteenth-century English Catholicism. Converted to Catholicism as a youth, he entered the English College at Douai in 1705 and remained there for twenty-five years. After completing his studies, he taught rhetoric and poetry and then philosophy, received his bachelor's degree in theology from the University of Douai in 1719, and became professor of theology, prefect of studies, and vice-president of the English College. He received his doctorate in theology at Douai in 1727. Challoner returned to England in 1730 and later became Vicar Apostolic of the London District. His long residence at Douai made him a product of, and later an important transmitter of, the scholarly and devotional culture of the English Catholic college in exile.

Alban Butler (Appletree 1710 – Saint-Omer 1773) was an English Catholic priest, historian, and hagiographer, best known for his monumental *Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints*. He was educated at the English College at Douai, where he completed the full course of studies and was ordained priest in 1735. Recognised for his exceptional learning, he remained at Douai as a professor, teaching first philosophy and later theology. It was during his years at the college that he began the research that eventually produced his *Lives of the Saints*. Butler later became president of the English College at Saint-Omer, but his intellectual formation and early academic career were closely tied to Douai.

Edmund Campion (London 1540 – London 1581) was an English humanist, Jesuit, and Catholic controversialist, later executed during the reign of Elizabeth I. After an outstanding career at Oxford and a period in Ireland, he left the British Isles in 1571 and entered the English College at Douai, where he openly reconciled himself with the Catholic Church. At Douai he completed his theological studies, taught rhetoric, received minor orders and the subdiaconate, and obtained the degree of Bachelor of Divinity from the University of Douai in January 1573. He then left for Rome and entered the Society of Jesus. Returning to England as part of the Jesuit mission in 1580, he became famous for his *Decem rationes*; he was arrested, tried for treason, and executed at Tyburn in 1581. Douai was therefore the decisive stage in Campion's transition from Oxford humanist to Catholic theologian and missionary.



Figure 3: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

Leonardus Lessius (Brecht 1554 – Louvain 1623) was a Jesuit theologian and moral philosopher, particularly influential for his writings on justice, contracts, finance, and economic ethics. After studying philosophy at Louvain and entering the Society of Jesus in 1572, he was sent to Douai after his novitiate. From the mid-1570s until 1581 he taught philosophy at the Jesuit Collège d’Anchin, which was incorporated into the University of Douai. Among his pupils there was the future English Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell. Lessius subsequently studied theology in Rome and became professor of scholastic theology at the Jesuit college in Louvain (de la Croix and Vitale 2024). His years at Douai thus belong to the formative teaching phase of a career that later made him one of the most important representatives of late scholastic thought in the Low Countries.

William Allen (Rossall 1532 – Rome 1594) was an English Catholic theologian, cardinal, and the principal architect of the English Catholic seminary system in exile. Educated at Oxford, where he became principal of St Mary’s Hall, he left England after the accession of Elizabeth I. Having studied and taught at Douai, he became regius professor of divinity at the new university. In 1568, with the support of figures such as John Vendeville, Allen founded the English College at Douai, intended initially to preserve Catholic higher education for English exiles and increasingly to train priests for the English mission. He devoted his university salary to the college and served as its first president. Under Allen, Douai became one of the principal intellectual and institutional centres of post-Reformation English Catholicism and later the place associated with the preparation of the Douay–Rheims Bible.

Thomas Stapleton (Henfield 1535 – Louvain 1598) was an English Catholic theologian and controversialist who spent most of his career in exile in the Low Countries. A former fellow of New College, Oxford, he left England after Elizabeth I’s accession and studied theology at Louvain and Paris. In 1568 he joined William Allen at Douai and played an important role in the establishment of the English College, lecturing there and contributing his salary as a theology lecturer at the Collège d’Anchin to its support. He soon became public professor of divinity at the University of Douai and received the doctorate in theology there in 1571. Stapleton was one of the most learned controversial theologians associated with the early English College; after a later period at Louvain, he became professor of Scripture there in 1590.

8 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Following de la Croix and Morault (2025), our assumption is that a professor’s involvement in multiple universities throughout their career establishes a link between those institutions. We present the universities that were connected to the University of Douai during each period in Figure 4.

The picture it delivers is very simple: in the first period, there was a vibrant community of mobile scholars, which translated into a rich network of interconnected universities; in the last three periods, by contrast, scholar mobility was very limited, and few universities remained connected. If we regard mobility as one component of institutional quality, we should acknowledge that the spike in notoriety observed around 1770 has no counterpart here. Over the period 1734–1800, the University of Douai had become a relatively minor institution, attracting few, if any, mobile scholars.

9 WHO’S WHO ON THE MOON

There are various indicators of an individual’s notable achievements, such as the recognition they receive through the naming of streets, schools, research institutes, prizes, and even lunar craters. One scholar associated with the University of Douai has been honoured by having a crater on the surface of the Moon named after him.

Charles Malapert (Mons 1581 – Vitoria 1630) was a Jesuit mathematician, astronomer, and Latin writer from the Spanish Netherlands (now Belgium). After teaching in Lorraine and at the

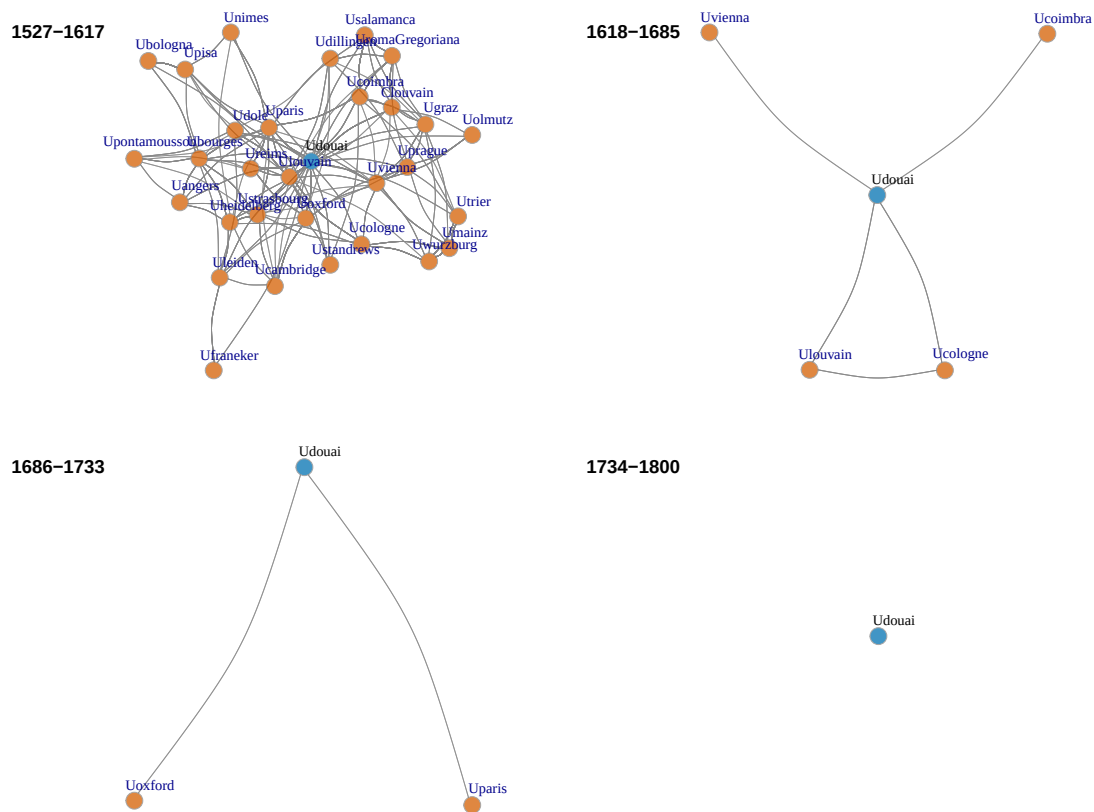


Figure 4: Links between Douai and other universities through scholars' mobility by period

Jesuit college of Kalisz in Poland, he was appointed professor of mathematics at Douai in 1617–1618 and held the chair there for much of the following decade. At Douai he carried out astronomical observations with his assistant Alexius Sylvius Polonus, notably a systematic series of observations of sunspots between 1618 and 1626, as well as work on the Moon and comets. He also served as superior of the Scottish College at Douai. Although Malapert remained committed to an Aristotelian cosmology and opposed Copernican interpretations, his telescopic observations formed a significant contribution to early seventeenth-century observational astronomy. He later became rector of the Jesuit college at Arras and was appointed to a new chair of mathematics at the Imperial College in Madrid (de la Croix and Karioun 2021), but died at Vitoria in 1630 while travelling to Spain.

10 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Douai provides a striking example of rapid ascent followed by gradual decline. Founded in the second half of the sixteenth century, it soon established itself as an important centre for theology and law. Its intellectual prominence, however, faded over the course of the seventeenth century, and this decline was further reinforced after the city passed under French rule.

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Homepage: <https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html>

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