

Universities 2030:
Learning from the Past to Anticipate the Future

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“Higher Education Between National Ambitions, Supranational Coordination,
and Global Competition: The University of Luxembourg Established in the Bologna Era”

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Among the youngest research universities in Europe, the University of Luxembourg (UL) is one of very few public universities to be established since the pan-European “Bologna process” began in 1998 amidst celebrations for the Sorbonne’s 800th Anniversary.¹ Founded in 2003, and growing rapidly, UL aims to become a full-fledged, internationally recognized research university. Embedded in a small, hyper-diverse, multi-lingual, and (recently) very prosperous nation-state located in the heart of Western Europe, and well-positioned in significant regional and global networks, Luxembourg’s “national” flagship university is thoroughly international. Recruiting scholars, staff, and students from over a hundred countries, the university could not advance without transnational mobility. Luxembourg, the home of a European Union (EU) capital city, simultaneously reflects European and international priorities. Devoted to internationality and interdisciplinarity, UL exemplifies contemporary worldwide trends in higher education.

Today, more than ever, countries explicitly compete with each other through human capital investment. The Lisbon strategy in Europe set about to create “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world” (EC 2004). European education ministers collaborate to promote a comprehensive, continent-wide model of skill formation. This emergent model, a *bricolage* that integrates diverse characteristics of the German, French, British, and American national models, responds to heightened competition among “knowledge societies” (Powell, Bernhard, & Graf 2012). The Bologna process represents a considerably intensified phase in higher education’s on-going internationalization. While voluntary, Bologna exerts pressure on national systems and influences decision-making (Ravinet 2008). Membership in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) challenges countries to accept common standards and practices to coordinate national quality assurance, ensure the transparency and recognition of qualifications obtained elsewhere, and facilitate cross-border mobility.

Somewhat paradoxically, at the same time that European borders are becoming more porous, and spatial mobility everywhere supported and glorified, Luxembourg has invested heavily in establishing a new national university. In so doing, it has provided, at long last, a stay-home alternative for Luxembourg youth who had traditionally sought higher education abroad. On the one hand, the university was founded against considerable resistance, both pecuniary and ideological, due to the long-standing custom of educating elites in other countries within cosmopolitan networks (Rohstock & Schreiber 2013). On the other hand, rising international

¹ This essay builds on prior work that analyzed university institutionalization in small states, contrasting Luxembourg and Qatar (Powell 2012).

competition and supranational coordination have increased pressure on Luxembourg to found a research university to foster scientific innovation upon which to build its future “knowledge society.” UL provides a means to diversify the economy beyond steelmaking or banking and to integrate multilingual citizens from diverse cultural background into a polity dominated by local elites.

The University of Luxembourg, now enjoying broad-based support and a rising reputation, provides a gauge of the impact of global norms generally and the principles codified in the Bologna process specifically. Arriving in a new century with a rapidly growing population of just half a million (nearly half non-Luxembourg citizens), UL exemplifies the most recent institutionalization phase of “the European university.” Due to its recent establishment, UL has straightforwardly assumed European standards – or even exceeded them, especially in multilinguality (French, German, and English are official university languages) and student mobility.

Although the university’s antecedents can be traced back to the early 1800s, it was not until 1974 that the *Centre universitaire du Luxembourg*, hosting several humanities and social science departments, opened alongside teacher training institutes and an *Institut supérieur de technologie* (Meyer 2008). The UL, building upon these legacies, was established as a private, government-dependent institution (*établissement public*) directed by a seven-member council, the *Conseil de Gouvernance*. The UL’s founders, made up largely of national policymakers consulting advisors from abroad, selected multilingualism, interdisciplinarity, and inter-nationality as the institution’s three key principles. These foci not only reflect global trends but also capitalize on Luxembourg’s history as a trading crossroads, as well as its contemporary context of cultural and linguistic hyper-diversity. The mission statement emphasizes that as “a small-sized institution with an international reach, [it] aims at excellence in research and education. ... to be among the world’s top universities. UL intends to be innovative, centred on research, ... and attentive to the needs of the society around it” (www.uni.lu 2012).

With roughly half of its 6,288 students (2012/13) coming from abroad, UL is extraordinarily diverse (UL 2013). Regardless of nationality, each student pays tuition of just €200 per semester. Thus, state investment in higher education ensures that the university can attract students from around the world. All Bachelor-level students are expected to spend a semester abroad as a required part of their course of study—a reflection of past educational traditions and a unique requirement among European institutions. The network *Université de la Grande Région* (www.uni-gr.eu) links the UL with universities in Belgium, France, Germany, and provides cross-border coordination, enabling such benefits as students’ eligibility to take courses at other campuses at no additional cost.

Since Luxembourg has traditionally relied heavily on tertiary education provided in neighboring countries—especially Germany, Belgium, and France—to supply qualified personnel, especially teachers, lawyers, and physicians, a key challenge remains to recruit the most talented undergraduate student body. Over half of Luxembourg’s workforce consists of cross-border workers, and the country continues to experience strong population growth. In a

hyper-diverse society marked by such migration flows and mobility, internationalization has been key to the establishment and expansion of the university from the start. To develop an institution based on local strengths, regional needs, and global trends, UL aims to achieve excellence by recruiting top faculty members worldwide to conduct research and teach in three multidisciplinary faculties and two major interdisciplinary research centers. By identifying in advance promising research areas that also reflect Luxembourg's economic and geographic contexts, the university focuses its resources on key priorities.

Luxembourg has invested both considerable capital and strategic planning in establishing its national university. It aims to compete globally by concentrating its resources, both intellectual and financial, and by building on the country's strengths and priorities. It may have taken a leap of faith to establish the university, but the state—led by those who accept the principle that the future belongs to education and science—has shown dedication to fund its ambitious experiment in scientific capacity building. There is no turning back, as the new Belval campus towers rise among the steel-factory smokestacks of Esch-sur-Alzette.

However small, no country wishing to become a “knowledge society” can do so without an international research university. As many larger countries in Europe struggle to maintain their universities in the Bologna era, Luxembourg has grasped a window of opportunity. 2003 was a key moment in its history of higher education, long abbreviated by internationality *avant la lettre*.

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