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# Evaluating universal student mobility: contrasting policy discourse and student narratives in Luxembourg

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## ABSTRACT

For decades, Luxembourg did without a national university. Before and after the University of Luxembourg's founding (UL) (2003), tertiary education and the status of being a Luxembourgish student have been closely linked to international student mobility (ISM). This long-standing tradition was maintained in the new university via compulsory ISM: to bolster elite European networks and internationalization. Focusing on ISM from Luxembourg, based on analysis of policy documents regarding the UL's foundation and state allowances for students, we show that policymakers strongly favored ISM. We confront this policy agenda with the perspectives and self-identifications of both credit and degree mobile Luxembourgish students. In narrative interviews, students did not always view compulsory ISM as positively as did policymakers. For students, the *quality* of a stay abroad is far more important: a perspective lacking in the state's *quantity*-driven agenda. In the country with the highest ISM rates globally, constraints continue to hinder equity in ISM.

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## 1. Introduction: diverse perspectives on international student mobility

Research on international student mobility (ISM) has grown significantly in recent years (Riaño & Piguët, 2016). Anglophone receiver countries of degree mobile students have long been the central focus, although comparative perspectives have increased (e.g. Brooks, 2021). Contributions on many countries, including Luxembourg, are scarce. Originally, ISM was conceptualized foremost as an individual decision-making process (Raghuram, 2013). Recent contributions increasingly focus on family, education, and political institutions (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2020). The impact of (supra) national policies on mobility processes is indeed crucial, as 'higher education institutions do not operate in a vacuum' (Caruso & De Wit, 2015, pp. 279f.). At the same time, ISM is often presented as a *must-have* in the

context of career planning. Yet contexts in which ISM is the main or only pathway to attain tertiary qualifications constitute a research gap, which we address here.

The case of Luxembourg, one of Europe's smallest but fastest-growing and most culturally-diverse societies, located at the heart of Western Europe, provides an ideal context to analyze interrelated topics of student flows, mobility determinants, and policy perspectives. Luxembourg has a long-standing tradition of study abroad, a leading young national university (founded in 2003), and worldwide highest levels of ISM. Luxembourg belongs to the subgroup of small states (Martin & Bray, 2011) that often maintain fluid borders and close ties to larger neighbors. Small states cooperate heavily with other countries within supranational frameworks (such as the Bologna process), also to counteract their relatively scarce human resources; they emphasize cross-border educational exchange due to less-differentiated higher education (HE) landscapes (see Powell, 2012).

Luxembourg's previously limited domestic HE opportunities resulted from a centuries-old tradition of outward degree ISM (discussed below). Here, we contrast the official ISM policy discourse and the perspectives of young people regarding omnipresent mobility into and from Luxembourg. This enables a multi-level analysis of macro and micro perspectives on ISM. In our contribution, we ask: How are societal norms and state policy rationales interrelated to individual-level perceptions and motivations for study abroad? How do young people interpret the ideal of universal mobility and, indeed, the reality of compulsory study abroad, in HE?

Next, we introduce the Luxembourgish context – unique patterns of HE development and ISM – and theorize omnipresent, compulsory student mobility. Then, we explore factors supporting but also restricting ISM, and present data sources and methods used. In conclusion, we discuss the interplay of political discourse and individual experiences of degree and credit mobile students from Luxembourg and their perceptions of their home country's ubiquitous mobility regime.

## 2. Luxembourg's unique European higher education landscape

To contextualize analysis on ISM from Luxembourg, we sketch the history of HE development (Margue, 2003). Unlike most other European countries, including other small states, Luxembourg remained without its own national university until this century. It had relied heavily on extensive international cooperation and mobility within *The Greater Region* of neighboring Belgium, France, Germany – and pan-European networks to meet its human capital needs (Graf & Gardin, 2018). In recent decades, even Luxembourg has become more of a *schoolled society* (Baker, 2014), as the

importance of well-educated citizenry was increasingly recognized. As a capital city of the EU and one of the world's key financial centers, Luxembourg is a hyper-diverse society and its knowledge-based economy has among the most highly educated, professional workforces (Frank & Meyer, 2020). The demand for HE to secure future opportunities led families with resources to select specific universities abroad, often to access particular subjects or professional tracks, in order to maximize their offspring's employment opportunities upon returning to Luxembourg.

Despite Luxembourg being the richest country in GDP per capita in the EU, its own HE system remained underdeveloped for decades. The main pathways into HE were bilateral agreements with other European countries to ensure a contingent of student placements available for Luxembourgish youth at foreign universities located mainly in countries sharing an official language, German or French (Rohstock & Schreiber, 2012). Due to Luxembourg's multilingual school system and cultural and lingual hyper-diversity throughout the country, students are fluent in numerous European languages, strongly facilitating study abroad opportunities.

Over decades, those who studied abroad created so-called student circles (*Cercles d'Étudiants Luxembourgeois*). Emerging first in Belgium and Germany around 1880, they provided support for students from Luxembourg while abroad. Maintaining good relations with Luxembourg officials and civil servants, circle members benefited from access to contacts in high positions in social, political, and business life. Thus, student circles can be understood as key to elite formation and socially-stratified reproduction (Braband, 2015).

Despite the long-standing tradition of study abroad, some voiced their support for a national university already in the 19th century; yet only in the context of advancing Europeanization of HE (Bologna process; Lisbon strategy) was this call ultimately acted upon (see Braband & Powell, 2021). Older arguments against, such as cost and challenges of institutionalization, had lost their salience as Luxembourg's wealth increased and many other small European countries had founded their own national universities (Braband & Powell, 2021). In 2002, Erna Hennicot-Schoepges, Luxembourg's first HE minister, presented plans for a national research university (Braband, 2015). Just a year later, the *University of Luxembourg* (UL) was founded. All undergraduate students at the UL were (are) required to spend a semester abroad; a unique feature of HE in the European context. Thus, organizational innovation and investment was paired with maintenance of a valued tradition, making a truly unique HE system: the UL did not replace, but rather supplemented and expanded this taken-for-granted norm.

In comparison to many other countries, Luxembourg invests considerable sums in student allowances that are portable abroad. Providing grants to 72% of HE students, Luxembourg's coverage is fourth highest in the EU; after Malta (93%), Denmark (89%), and Sweden (88%) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). This generous system of scholarships and allowances forms part of our analysis below. Among OECD countries in 2015, Luxembourg had the highest ratio of degree outgoing students: while nearly three-quarters (73%) of Luxembourg nationals in a cohort enroll in tertiary education abroad (OECD, 2017, p. 302), just above a quarter (27%) study at UL. The top destinations for mobile degree students from Luxembourg are Belgium, Germany, France, the UK, and Austria; for credit mobile students Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Austria (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019). These distributions are unsurprising due to shared national language(s) and spatial proximity.

### 3. Theorizing international student mobility opportunities and constraints

Opportunities and constraints relating to ISM can be observed at (supra) national, institutional, network, and individual levels. Regarding the (supra) national level, sending countries often use ISM as part of long-term human capital development strategies. Countries support financially those going abroad 'to give students the knowledge and skills that they need to become successful, not only for themselves but for the benefit of the country' (Taylor & Albasri, 2014, p. 111). Returning students contribute to the creation of new knowledge and skills at home (Perna et al., 2015). This perspective is particularly applicable to small countries with expanding economies but limited native human capital resources, like Luxembourg (Graf & Gardin, 2018), which not only has the highest proportion of ISM globally but also has among the highest tertiary attainment rates (Braband & Powell, 2021, p. 14).

The founding of new universities does require huge investments; in small countries these are proportionately higher, lacking economies of scale (Bray, 2011). Thus, outgoing degree ISM – often supported with government grants – has been an attractive alternative to university attendance at home in small states (Baldacchino, 2011). However, government scholarships may be linked to certain regulations and restrictions regarding study programs, targeting those considered as relevant to a country's growth (McManus & Nobre, 2017; Taylor & Albasri, 2014) or related to specific stipulations for and/or after graduation (Basford & van Riemsdijk, 2015; Pásztor, 2015). Constraints regarding destinations are certainly present in the Erasmus+ program, as it prescribes not only the destination but also the host organizations, usually based on bilateral agreements.

Additionally, institutional frameworks are crucial, such as those regarding application regulations. Where these are not compatible between countries, even potentially attractive destinations may be restricted (Carlson, 2013). This problem is particularly surprising within the EU, as it is ideologically committed to and invests heavily financially in academic exchange. Furthermore, despite the priority of harmonization with the Bologna Process, and of EU higher education policy more generally, foreign educational credentials are sometimes rejected. Governments and HE organizations do not always recognize credits earned abroad (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Analogously, even within the EU, degree graduates are sometimes confronted with the lack of transferability of their qualifications (Tzanakou & Behle, 2017, p. 1397). These are powerful normative and regulatory restrictions on ISM programs and practices, despite ideological commitments to spatial, if less social, mobility in the Bologna Process (Powell & Finger, 2013).

Regarding the meso level, ISM opportunities are enhanced within highly educated and affluent groups and networks. The higher parental education or income is, the more likely is a stay abroad (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Lörz & Krawietz, 2011), yet even shorter stays aren't affordable for all students; for example, Erasmus scholarships hardly cover all incurred expenses (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Students embedded in networks with affinities for mobility internalize mobility norms early on (Beech, 2015). If mobility's many facets are widespread in a student's network, this supports those considering this alternative (Carlson, 2013).

Finally, at individual level, beyond material resources, language(s) spoken often facilitate or restrict ISM choices (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011). Mastery of (or ambition to learn) a language is often a crucial motivational force for study abroad (Kmiotek-Meier & Karl, 2017). High levels of foreign language fluency – ubiquitous in the case of Luxembourg – obviously facilitate ISM, yet students may prefer linguistic contexts corresponding to labor market requirements in their home country (Lasanowski, 2011).

The extent and importance of personal motivation for ISM should not be underestimated. Student self-interest is a pivotal factor (Bótas & Huisman, 2014) as disinterest poses a considerable barrier to participation (Beerkens et al., 2016). Further, willingness to participate in one form of ISM does not imply interest in other forms: Those who wish to pursue a degree abroad show less interest in credit mobility (Beerkens et al., 2016).

Thus, factors at macro, meso, and micro levels influence the propensity for ISM and these differ by context as structural constraints affect individual agency.

#### 4. Data and methods

To examine the interplay between the policy discourse and students' narratives, and to investigate the balance between opportunities and restrictions in the Luxembourgish context on different levels, we gathered two types of empirical material: policy documents and narrative biographical interviews. Policy documents, largely from Luxembourg's Parliament, include those relating to the foundation of the UL and regarding the provision of student allowances, were chosen to depict the state's rationale(s) regarding ISM from and into Luxembourg. To contrast the policy discourse with individual perspectives, narrative interviews with mobile students from Luxembourg were carried out.<sup>1</sup>

Policy documents relating to the foundation of the UL include legal documents and published official statements of the relevant parliamentary debates held in 2002/03. In total, the corpus consists of 14 documents (see [Table 1](#)). This source selection results from the lack, prior to the foundation of the UL, of a full-fledged policy in Luxembourg regarding ISM or of HE more generally. The policy documents formalized long taken-for-granted positions regarding ISM. Here, we focus on the findings regarding outgoing ISM, taking into account both credit and degree students as well as discussed (dis)advantages in regard to study abroad.

Policy documents regarding state allowances for students include regulations between 2000 and 2016. These were chosen for two reasons: the 2000 regulations were still in effect when the UL was founded (2003) and this generates concurrence between policy documents and interviews. All interviewees started their university education before 2016 and were subject to these regulations. Regulations regarding student allowances are laws (*Loi*

**Table 1.** List of analyzed sources, ordered chronologically by publication date (Dec. 2002 – Oct. 2003).

Document	Number in text
Bill on Foundation of the University of Luxembourg	5059
Opinion of Chamber for Civil Servants and Public Employees	5059_1
Amendment of Commission of the Higher Education, Research and Culture	5059_2
Amendment of Commission of the Higher Education, Research and Culture	5059_3
Opinion of Chamber of Private Employees	5059_4
Opinion of Chamber of Trades	5059_5
Opinion of Chamber of Commerce	5059_6
Opinion of Council of State	5059_7
Report of Commission of the Higher Education, Research and Culture	5059_9
Complementary report of Commission of the Higher Education, Research and Culture	5059_10
Opinion of Chamber of Labour	5059_11
Motion of Chamber of Deputies	1648
Exemption from second constitutional vote by the Council of State	5059_12
Law from 12 August 2003 on Foundation of the University of Luxembourg	A – No. 149

Note: No 5059\_8 was not published

*concernant l'aide financière de l'Etat pour études supérieures*). Five publicly available documents (2000, 2005, 2010, 2014, 2016) were analyzed, focusing on state allowances – types and amounts.

The second sample comprised 16 students' narrations: 7 credit students (who at the time of the interview studied at the UL and had already spent one semester abroad) and 9 degree students (who spent their entire education abroad and at the time of the interview were still studying or had already graduated). The sample was diversified in regard to criteria: study-related (type of ISM, degree level, study program, destination country) and person-related (gender, age). Interviews were conducted between October 2015 and April 2018, with questions sequenced according to the chronology of the stay abroad (before, during, after) and concluding with global topics such as reflections on experiences abroad and Luxembourg HE generally. The material was audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized; all interviewees gave their informed consent. Because all interviewees started tertiary education after 2003, they formally had the option of studying at UL. The narrative findings presented here based on the interviews belong to a broader analysis (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019) that applied a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

## 5. (Degree) student mobility: still a top priority for policymakers

The Bill on the Foundation of the UL (5059<sup>2</sup>) proposed the university's establishment and simultaneously started a debate on HE and its *raison d'être* throughout the country. The bill also proposed an institutionalized form of credit outgoing mobility relating to Luxembourg's tradition of degree study abroad (5059, p. 21), arguing that:

Mobility is perceived as an essential tool for positioning the Grand Duchy in the European innovation space, an area which will be increasingly competitive. In order to be able to cope with competition, Luxembourg must have an elite of senior executives capable of acting across borders and solidly involved in transnational networks. For Luxembourg, the mobility of its students therefore remains of principal importance.

This introduction clearly focuses on elite formation (in business) and the meaningfulness of mobility for the Luxembourgish (economic, scientific, and technological) context. The implementation of obligatory credit mobility at UL seems to reflect a prolongation of the tradition of tertiary education abroad. Although the bill only mentioned credit mobility, the debates afterwards oscillated around degree mobility, by then the Luxembourgish tradition, and they considered also the incoming side of mobility (5059, p. 21; 5059\_7, p. 3). The most striking point regarding the latter is that it was viewed as crucial to achieving 'critical mass' for the new university because



of the premise that the university would become an alternative but not a complete substitute for the tradition of study abroad for native youth (5059\_1, p. 2). Young people from Luxembourg were still meant to study abroad.

This exchange of arguments, primarily from an economic point of view, reflects the spirit of neoliberalism and the *knowledge economy* codified in many EU programs. As in other regions (Olssen & Peters, 2005), the fostering of HE was explicitly viewed as an investment in economic diversification (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2020; Powell, 2012). Specifically, the newly founded UL was designed to recruit human resources to the country. From an educational perspective, the university was seen as enabling independence regarding tertiary curricula (5059\_6, p. 2) and as an important chance to take responsibility for the country's future direction in HE (5059\_4, p. 2).

Despite these perceived advantages, concerns regarding the potential university were articulated. One of the main arguments against it was the fear that young people might reject the tradition of degree study abroad (5059\_4, 5059\_7). This scenario would mean a shift in strategy in terms of constituting the country's elites (Braband, 2015). For some, it was uncertain if the new university could adequately fulfill the task of elite formation and how it would contribute to maintenance of Luxembourg's crucial pan-European and international networks.

Outgoing credit mobility was discussed as 'a positive aspect for the opening of the minds of the students' (5059\_7, p. 3). However, only the degree-level study abroad tradition was defined as a full-fledged way to broaden the horizons of Luxembourgish youth, the future of the country: 'the young were forced to leave their "village" to organize themselves in an unknown and much broader milieu, and to measure themselves with colleagues from all horizons' (5059\_4, p. 4). Ironically, Luxembourg's socio-demographic hyperdiversity means students studying abroad may well study in a less diverse context than home – contrary to policymakers' arguments.

These pro-mobility arguments, and especially pro-degree mobility, highlight advantages on two levels: on the individual level, as opportunities for personal growth, and on the national, as opportunities to forge international networks supporting economic growth. In the debate, not a single stakeholder questioned the obligatory credit stay abroad for those studying in Luxembourg. Rather, the scope of the stay abroad was discussed. The debate showed that outgoing mobility is considered the crucial pillar of Luxembourg HE. In the final version of the law establishing the UL, an obligatory credit stay abroad was anchored in all Bachelor programs – outgoing mobility was enshrined in national law (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2020).

**Table 2.** Regulations of student allowances, 2000–2016.

Year	Max. amount (€) per academic year in total	Sub-allowances: max. amount (€) per academic year	Type of allowance	% or max. amount as grant in regard to respective sub-allowance
2000	16,350	16,350	General	Depending on student and parental financial situation, and on student fees
2010	17,700	13,000	General/base	Depending on student financial situation
		3,700	Fees	50% <sup>a</sup>
		1,000	Extraordinary circumstances	50%
2014	18,700	11,500 <sup>b</sup>	General/base	€2,000
		2,000	General	100%
			/mobility	
		3,000	Social <sup>c</sup>	100%
		500	Familial <sup>d</sup>	100%
		3,700	Fees	50% <sup>a</sup>
		1,000	Extraordinary circumstances	50%
2016	19,950	12,300 <sup>b</sup>	General/base	€2,000
		2,450	General	100%
			/mobility	
		3,800	Social <sup>c</sup>	100%
		500	Familial <sup>d</sup>	100%
		3,700 <sup>a</sup>	Fees	50%
		1,000	Extraordinary circumstances	50%

Source: Own compilation.

Notes: The document from 2005 introduced no monetary changes.

<sup>a</sup>The first €100 must be covered completely by students; all fees above €100 are covered thus:

50% grant and 50% loan.

<sup>b</sup>the amount depends on the level of social allowance.

<sup>c</sup>the amount depends on household income.

<sup>d</sup>if > 1 student/household.

Analysis of this political debate shows how strongly outgoing mobility was supported by policymakers. We turn now to the regulations of student allowances, which make clear that this discursive support led to concrete state actions and considerable investments in HE (see Table 2).

Three observations are relevant to answer our research questions. Firstly, the amount of student allowance covering student fees is much higher than the fee level in Luxembourg (maximally €800 per academic year). Thus, study at foreign HE organizations is foreseen and heavily supported by the state. Secondly, since 2014 there is an explicit mobility student allowance for those studying abroad, both credit and degree students, yet conditional on residence abroad. Thus, costs of living only for students studying and living abroad are compensated; despite very high rental prices in Luxembourg, students there receive no additional rental allowance, thus often ‘sentenced’ to live in the parental home. Thirdly, only mobility and social allowances were adjusted in 2016, while the base allowance stayed untouched, meaning that only mobile study periods, both as credit or degree student, were granted additional money to meet rising costs.

The analysis of the parliamentary debate on the eve of UL's foundation and of trends in student allowances showed that the Luxembourgish state favors degree study abroad over other forms of tertiary education. Outgoing mobility – in every form – is supported by policymakers not only discursively, but concretely in the generous financing of education abroad. Due to the changes regarding the state student allowances from 2016, such support is related to the family's financial situation, meaning parental dependence, which could affect who studies abroad and who stays at home. The state allowances (non-repayable grants), despite being comparatively generous (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018), are not sufficient to cover all study abroad expenses, with students relying on family support and/or student loans. Thus, the group going abroad remains socially selective – and this, in turn, reproduces social stratification in Luxembourg (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019).

## 6. Students' perspectives on the changing landscapes of student mobility

The law mandates that all Bachelor students at UL spend at least one semester abroad. Luxembourgish students still have no choice but to study abroad,<sup>3</sup> whether as degree students or while studying at UL and leaving for one semester as credit students. Yet what do young people think about this persistent mobility norm? We distinguish degree students (DS) from credit students (CS), using these terms – instead of international students and home students, respectively goers and stayers – to emphasize Luxembourg's extraordinary levels of ISM.

We first turn to narrations of DS and then to narrations of CS and their perceptions of obligatory credit stay abroad. We draw some conclusions on the overall idea of study abroad and its understanding and support among DS and CS.

### *Mobility as normality*

In general, our interviews suggest that DS are in favor of completing studies abroad. They consider their own mobility in the context of other Luxembourgish students who also pursue their entire tertiary education abroad. Other DS from Luxembourg are the reference group. In the narrations of DS, we find words like *all* or *we*, even if the rest of the first-person narration is *me*:

I1, DS: “And the thing is, they are, they all studied abroad.”

I9, DS: “Because I think many of us in Luxembourg want to leave anyway. To see something different and not just stay in the small country.”

The others are used to construct a reference to their own history, which conforms to the others who study completely abroad. However, as the narrations of CS in Luxembourg will show, the consensus to study abroad is breaking down.

This constructed normality of studying abroad is derived from two facts. DS relate to constrained options in Luxembourg to obtain a tertiary degree, as the UL does not offer the entire spectrum of subjects, especially at the Bachelor level. But DS also address the biographical moment that occurs after school graduation. They view the transition to HE as an appropriate moment to leave their small home country.

DS consider complete study abroad to be the only pathway in which the transition to adulthood, including the broadening of personal horizons, can be achieved. In this regard, DS can be said to reflect and confirm the state’s rationale. Linking the desire for autonomy with the constricted local educational possibilities lets DS construct degree study abroad as normal.

### ***Compulsory mobility***

The normality of studying abroad as formulated by the DS is absent in CS’ narrations. For all but one CS, study abroad was thinkable, but not the only option. They took seriously options for studies in another country, including applying for placement abroad. Some were accepted, but chose the Luxembourgish alternative. Regardless of whether CS wish to complete a credit stay abroad while studying at the UL or are reluctant to do so, they consider ISM as an obligation or even coercion:

I8, CS: “At first I wasn’t very excited to leave because I thought so, yes, you are actually forced to go away. Having no choice whether to go or not, I didn’t think it is good.”

I18, CS: “I was forced. Really forced.”

The majority of interviewed CS argue against an obligatory stay abroad in the UL Bachelor programs, even if in most cases, the particular credit stay abroad was viewed positively. CS tend to argue from three perspectives. They state that personal and/or financial situations do not allow everyone to leave Luxembourg for half a year. Although the interviewees did not have serious financial troubles during their stays, in some cases their mobility was achieved only by spending their savings. The costs of living abroad are often higher than for those studying at the UL, especially in comparison to those who live with their parents and usually do not pay rent. The UL foresees some hardship cases; then students can waive the mandatory credit semester. According to Interviewee 17 (CS), the waiver rules are too narrow and

fellow students have even misused waiver rules (for chronically ill students) to remain in Luxembourg by obtaining a false medical certificate. However, Interviewee 17 does not criticize those students, but the regulation that caused this behavior:

I17, CS: 'I find it a bit of a shame that a lot of people do like this, I'm not saying illegal, but that really they have to find such a gap for waiving the stay. That you can't just say "No, I don't want that". Because that was the case with me too. I couldn't say: "No, I changed my mind, I don't want to do it." It is not an option.'

This also exemplifies the second argument against compulsory stays abroad: the student's status. CS see themselves as adults who have already made the decision to pursue a degree in Luxembourg. The mandatory stay abroad questions their ability to make decisions in general. The expectation of autonomy placed in the student status, and granted for DS, is partially undermined by the compulsory credit stay abroad:

I8, CS: "I thought, we are no longer small children, we can decide it ourselves."

The negative attitude results, thirdly, from a lack of understanding of this regulation. CS see credit mobility as mobility for its own sake and do not regard the university's (and the state's) arguments as sensible. The widening of academic horizons, prized by the university, is undermined by the selection process as students first choose the destinations; only later their courses. Not all partner organizations are known for their high quality. The envisaged cultural exchange is also questionable, since offered destinations are often geographically and culturally very close to Luxembourg. These locations may well already be familiar to the students, thus not generating additional motivation, and are well-connected to Luxembourg, which means regular visits home and potentially less in-depth cultural exchange or networking abroad – the very argument policymakers highlight:

I7, CS: "The students with lower grade average had to choose the remaining destinations ... They were not interesting ... So, there was some discussion [among the students] and some students were surely envious of the others ... Because the entire destination list was not really inventive, so to say ... There were many destinations really close to [Luxembourg]."

The choice of partner universities for credit exchange, including many universities across the borders, is not a matter of chance. In the parliamentary debates 'it has been emphasized that it is necessary for Luxembourg to continue cooperating with neighboring countries, especially within the framework of the Greater Region' (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2020; 5059\_4, p. 5). Thus, the state rationale seems to outweigh here the broadening of students' personal horizons.

The widening of personal horizons resulting from a credit stay are, however, recognized by students, but very often only retrospectively, and not by everyone:

I12, CS: “Now . . . I would say to myself, yes, maybe you should go further away, that’s why I would say that it’s a great experience.”

The economic, cultural, and personal assets prized in political discourse are not recognized by all CS. They do not assume the state’s mantra that everyone has to go abroad.

### *The idea to study abroad*

Two groups of students in Luxembourg exist: DS, for whom study abroad is normalized but voluntary, and CS, for whom study abroad is compulsory. The majority of all interviewees highly recommended a stay abroad:

I5, CS: “I think it is good to have such experiences. It can’t hurt.”

In contrast to the policy discourse, which favors sending young people abroad at all costs, young people opt for *voluntary* stays abroad. Even the greatest supporters are against the *obligation* to go:

I11, DS: “It is about broadening the horizons, it makes no sense to stay here in this country . . . but it’s an experience that everyone has to have for him/herself and, one is made for it, while the other has no desire for new experience.”

The credit and degree mobile students recommend mobility to others, as it allows new and mostly positive experiences, but above all mobility allows young people to gain personal freedom, a quality that seems to be especially important for young people from a small country:

I1, DS: “I would advise everyone to go abroad. Because Luxembourg is a very special case, because the country is so small. . . . And I think it is very, very, very important that you, even if you stay here, do at least one exchange semester.”

I4, CS: “Do it absolutely. Go away . . . have experiences, so don’t stay at home.”

Especially among DS the wish to leave the small country for the period of study was often articulated. They want to escape the setting where everyone knows everyone. But at the latest when beginning their work lives, even the stronger proponents of stays abroad return back home and decide for the comfortable solution for the future:

I1, DS: “Actually I didn’t want to come back [to Luxembourg] . . . Luxembourgish students . . . always say, they don’t want to come back. . . . but the thing is . . . it is easier to find a job in your country of origin.”

### *Idea(l) vs. financial feasibility*

The interviewees were open to educational stays abroad ideationally, yet the practicality and costs were more often questioned. The tradition of students going abroad is bolstered by a generous system of state financial support, explained above. Despite these grants, parents remain an important source of financial support. Only four interviewees did not mention parents as a source of support; they were all CS. In the interviews, however, it was not apparent whether they could not count on parental support or whether their stay was financeable from other means. The duration and associated costs were addressed directly only by one person, a CS. Most students, especially the DS, were continuously financially supported by the parents throughout the entire course of their stay abroad, often mixed with government subsidies:

I16, DS: “And my parents helped me too. So, I got support from home and support from the state, it actually worked out.”

The mixture of state and parental financial support shows that the non-repayable resources provided by the state are in most cases inadequate to cover costs related to studies abroad. An online survey carried out among Luxemburgish students in 2017 showed that three-quarters of DS and over half of CS (statistically significant difference) relied (very) strongly on parental financial support during their study period abroad (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019). The differing abilities of families to pay and its consequences in regard to ISM were reflected in the interviews. Even those students without financial burdens realize that a degree attained abroad is an enormous financial investment for the household:

I9, DS: “I think what can stop you [from going] are the costs and I don’t think that every person can go abroad because it is quite expensive. . . . I knew that I would have the support from home, but I did not have to ask for it so far.”

This quote underlines the secure nature of study abroad when sufficient parental resources are available to form a safety net. Reflecting the interview findings and the survey cited above (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019), we conclude that parents’ financial resources play an important role in widening the horizons of their children’s educational choices. There is, as so often, a gap between haves and have-nots. The positivity surrounding the idea(l) of study abroad can indeed clash with (un)available financial resources:

I18, DS: “I noticed at some point that . . . I couldn’t really afford it: That what I really liked about [city A in France] was something not really accessible to me. Different people were able to do it, indeed from other family circumstances.”

Parental economic capital enables the expansion of their children's cultural and social capital (network formation). Only those who have the necessary financial means while studying abroad can participate fully in exchanges, like eating out, with other (Luxembourgish) students. In most cases exactly this group of fellow Luxembourg natives is the primary peer-group abroad, followed by national students of the country of destination and other international students (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019).

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

Due to disciplinary limitations in UL's curricular offerings (due to the focus on graduate education in areas prioritized in national research policymaking) and the national tradition to study abroad, degree mobility is still the most common pathway to obtain a tertiary-level degree among Luxembourg's youth. The state's position favoring education abroad as well as generations educated abroad, for whom international study was the only form of HE they knew, established this powerful norm. Yet younger generations, especially credit students, question the policy of compulsory mobility.

Our multi-level analysis uncovered policymakers' values and the nascent discourse surrounding university education and ISM from Luxembourg. We compared these with tertiary-level students' personal views. Both the debates on the eve of the UL's foundation and the development of generous state-provided student allowances were shaped by the long-standing tradition of study abroad. For years, Luxembourgish politicians have emphasized the importance of student degree outgoing mobility, as the graduates bring knowledge, know-how, and their networks home from abroad (Rohstock & Schreiber, 2012). Arguments about widening horizons and personal growth were present in debates; also discussed in other small states, such as Macau (Bray & Kwok, 2003, p. 423). We showed that in Luxembourg the promobility ideal is practically mirrored by state allowance regulations. However, as revealed in the interviews, those policies and programs of financial support, do not completely compensate social disparities in families' social and economic capital that ISM often demands.

Our analysis then addressed issues surrounding compulsory academic mobility from the perspective of tertiary students themselves. ISM is generally well-accepted among Luxembourgish youth, reflecting the dominant political discourse and permeable national borders facilitating travel to neighboring countries. The main difference is that the credit students see complete education abroad as an alternative, while the degree students see theirs as the only true HE option. Interviewed students' perspectives range between extremes: *international mobility as normality* and *mobility*



*under compulsion*. Mobility experiences were nevertheless positively connoted for the majority, resulting from the diverse meanings young people ascribe to their time abroad, which they see as a transition and *rite de passage* to adult life as they gain independence from their parents. Educational aspects were viewed as secondary. The state's perspective on widening horizons was mirrored by young people. However, young people meant rather personal learning and widening cultural horizons. Policymakers' key rationale – to gain foreign know-how and bolster career-advancing international networks – was not mentioned once in the sixteen student interviews.

Although we reconstruct the development of omnipresent – and compulsory – ISM in Luxembourg, we conclude that HE generally and ISM specifically is not only facilitated, but also constricted on different levels via government regulations and existing social inequalities, especially family income and education level.

(1) *Constricted educational offer*. As a young, small, research-oriented university, UL cannot yet offer a universal curriculum consisting of all disciplines at all levels. Thus, for some subjects, students must study abroad. Interestingly, degree students who leave Luxembourg to pursue studies in their dream subject not offered by UL, do not feel forced to go, seeing it as their own decision (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019). On the contrary, students who view compulsory mobility as coercion – credit students – feel deprived of their freedom of choice, even if their concrete experiences abroad are mainly positive.

(2) *Constricted accessibility of degree studies*. The policymakers' original fears in 2002 that Luxembourgish students would stop pursuing their education abroad turned out to be unfounded. The majority (73%) continue to pursue degree mobility, conforming to the strong Luxembourgish norm of ISM. However, those fears are accurate regarding families with lower incomes, as a less expensive HE alternative has become available. Both credit and degree students recognize the financial burden linked with a (degree) study abroad and see UL as an affordable, and increasingly attractive, alternative. Such financial aspects were very often mentioned and confirmed by a survey among Luxembourg students, which found that among less affluent households, the proportion of students enrolled at UL is particularly high (30%), decreasing with increasing parental income (ACEL, 2015). Although Luxembourg is the country with the highest GDP per capita in the EU (Eurostat, 2018) and the standard of living is more favorable than in many other countries, the students interviewed clearly show the disparities between general macroeconomic indicators and individual situations and perceptions. Thus, we may apply the findings from countries without ubiquitous ISM and where (credit) ISM is significantly less frequently attempted by lower social strata, as 'their higher cost

sensitivity and lower benefit expectation explain their reluctance to study abroad' (Lörz et al., 2016, p. 153). In Luxembourg, less wealthy students and families opt for credit mobility and study in Luxembourg because degree mobility is far less affordable. The state's ideals and the cultural norm are simply not equally attainable for everybody. Thus, future research should clarify whether such social divisions are caused mainly by financial resources or due also to network influence, especially parents' attitudes and aspirations regarding the (higher) educational pathways of their children. Indeed, Luxembourg's pathways through secondary education reflect a highly selective and stratified system that perpetuates educational and financial disparities (Backes, 2018).

Evidence that similar mechanisms may also operate in HE in Luxembourg includes differences between degree and credit students regarding the composition of their networks. Degree students do not have many stayers, i.e. credit students, among their peers, which perpetuates social boundaries. Credit and degree students hardly compare themselves. If so, social distinctions are more likely to be drawn by degree students who point out that they would not want to study in Luxembourg. For both groups, the frame of reference (Clibborn, 2018) is not all tertiary students from Luxembourg, but their respective group, either degree students or credit students (completing their degree at the UL). However, degree students do not see themselves as superior to credit students. Similarly, credit students do not speak about themselves in inferior terms. Mostly, they are enrolled at UL in programs preparing for well-paid and secure civil servant jobs as teachers and social workers.

(3) *Constricted freedom of choice (of destination)*. Credit students are deprived of deciding whether they want to go abroad. If their grades are low, their destination choices are constrained as well. We observe general discontent with the obligatory credit semester among stayers. This results from particular biographical momentum during the transition to adulthood, when beginning tertiary education; with this momentum differing between degree and credit students (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019). Degree students move to another country, starting life on their own, albeit with state and family financial support. Instead, credit students mostly continue living at home while enrolling at UL; their allowances are much lower than for degree students abroad. Contrary to degree students, credit students' student and adult status remain continuously in question (see also Kmiotek-Meier, 2019).

Coming full circle, we witness the interplay of the macro-level political and policy dimensions, including discourses, decisions, and regulations, and the consequences and reactions on the micro-level, as individuals reflect upon and (re-)trace their trajectories. Our findings offer insights crucial

beyond Luxembourg as they confirm research that has shown important group differences in rates and types of participation in study-related mobility (Lörz & Krawietz, 2011). Yet the extent to which young people's mobility is coerced or voluntary and how and why this is understood by them has remained a black box. Here, we addressed such crucial questions. This research could be extended to other mobility types and younger groups, because 'the current generation of young people globally are increasingly "on the move"' (Robertson et al., 2018, p. 213).

Before the foundation of the UL in 2003, the definition of tertiary students in Luxembourg was coterminous with internationally mobile students. In 2021, 18 years after the possibility to complete all three cycles of HE at home was inaugurated, degree ISM remains the main pathway to obtain tertiary education. In the meantime, by hosting thousands of incoming degree and credit students, the UL has developed into one of the most internationalized, culturally-diverse universities in the world (Times Higher Education, 2018). Thus, the Luxembourgish case presents a paradox. The universal mobility policy has led to a large student community abroad. Luxembourgish students meet daily with their Luxembourgish peers with student circles in university towns throughout Europe (Kmiotek-Meier, 2019; Rohstock & Schreiber, 2012), thus diminishing the expected gain of intercultural exchange and international networks. In contrast, those who stay at home and study at Europe's most international university enjoy more culturally diverse classrooms, and usually only leave for one semester, then confronted with more parochial, monocultural universities, mostly located in nearby regions. Whereas the state's rationale, rooted in the long-standing tradition to fully study abroad, emphasizes *quantity*, young people themselves focus on the *quality* of study abroad and on their free will.

## Notes

1. The official policy documents (in French) and interviews (in German) were translated into English by the authors.
2. We refer to the document numbers as annotated in Table 1.
3. Due to some private circumstances, e.g. chronic illness, students can be granted an exemption from this obligation.

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