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The agenda for now and the future: The centrality of international student mobility in Luxembourg's higher education policy discourse (0244)

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Introduction

Little is known about policies' role in shaping the landscapes of international student mobility (ISM) (inter)nationally (Riaño and Piguet, 2016). Often 'student migration was analysed as part of individual decision-making' (Raghuram, 2013, 143), neglecting the fact that ISM takes place within broader frames, such as family, education system, state, and supra-national contexts (but see Koh, 2012). We focus on the influence of higher education policy in shaping patterns of ISM in Luxembourg, a country boasting one of the highest ratios of outgoing and incoming degree and outgoing credit students worldwide (OECD, 2014).

Two main lenses to examine states' role in regard to ISM have been discussed so far: (1) filling in the gaps in financing higher education (Findlay, 2011) or facing public funds' cuts (Coate, 2009; Tannock, 2013); (2) the neo-liberal rationale in competing for the best and brightest to satisfy labour market needs (Thomas, 2017; Tremblay, 2005). Regarding the meaning of ISM for the sending country, discussions have shifted from brain drain/gain to a global circulation of knowledge and skills perspective (Madge et al., 2015; Raghuram, 2013; Welch and Zhen, 2008).

Methods

We base our analysis on documents that were part of parliamentary debates at the eve of the establishment of Luxembourg's first public university in 2003. Since there is no systematically integrated nor fully-spelled-out policy at the national level relating to outgoing or incoming student mobility in Luxembourg, the debates prior to the establishment of the UL in 2002/2003 can be understood as a discursive event in which arguments, legitimisation strategies, and political positions were exchanged with high density, such that the political strategies surrounding ISM became visible. The data analysis follows a discourse analytic approach inspired by Foucault's theoretical reflections and the sociology of knowledge (Keller, 2005; Schröder and Karl, 2017; Truschkat, 2012). In line with Foucault, discourses are understood as power/knowledge-formations that preconfigure action.

Results

In the analyses, we extracted three major, yet interconnected, lines of argumentation used when discussing student mobility, and more generally internationalisation of the future University.

The first line of argumentation refers to the future (vision) of Luxembourgish society and is linked to concepts and topics such as *knowledge society*, *future development of the country*, *innovation*, *international competition* and *labour force*, discussed also in other regions (see e.g. Jöns and Hoyler, 2013; Mosneaga and Agreggaard, 2012; Tannock, 2013; Tremblay, 2005). During the debates over the UL's foundation, one important focus was the development of Luxembourgish society and economy within European and global contexts. The aim was to ensure success of the country in global competition and in the transformation to a knowledge society. Investment in higher education was seen as a step towards diversification of the

economy. In this regard, the new to-be-founded university was acknowledged as one of the key players in the knowledge economy (Olssen and Peters, 2005) and as a provider of innovation, in stark contrast to older patterns, such as the steelmaking industry.

The second line of argumentation refers to the current state and oscillates around keywords such as *elites* and *sovereignty in higher education*. Luxembourgish student circles, situated mostly in the university towns of the neighbouring Greater Region¹ and across Western Europe, can especially be seen as a key instrument of elite formation. As the key positions in these circles are closely linked to established individuals and groups who lead Luxembourgish politics and industry, the circles function as boosters of students' future careers (Rohstock and Schreiber, 2012). In this light, the initiative of the UL's foundation questioned to some extent the strategy of sending young people abroad for tertiary education to build up the country's elites (see Braband, 2015). Major arguments were thus exchanged in the parliamentary debates if and how the UL would be able to secure this elite formation. On the one hand, parliamentarians argued that a national university might be able to match the country's needs more appropriately, acknowledging that students (elites) educated abroad are exposed to host countries' economic and sociocultural specifics, thus, referring to the 'soft power' (Haugen, 2013) foreign receiving countries may have on Luxembourgish elites. This line of argumentation shows the need for self-regulation of the curriculum and of vocational socialisation – here again to better meet the needs of the Luxembourgish labour market. The UL is viewed as a chance to take responsibility, regain sovereignty, and decide the future direction of higher education in the country.

The third line of argumentation reconstructed the *territorial areas of internationalisation* of the UL and underlies the two first lines of argumentation. In these debates, three geographic areas were targeted for cooperation and recruitment of

foreign students: the Greater Region, the EU and Europe, and the world beyond Europe. The first two have been addressed more frequently, showing that the implementation level occurs rather regionally, particularly with neighbouring countries.

Conclusion

In other countries, the added value of ISM from an economic perspective is seen in a possible two-step migration process securing the labour force (see e.g. Hawthorne, 2014 on Australia; Koh, 2012 on Singapore; Trilokekar and El Masri, 2016 on Canada), offering developmental help to economically weaker countries (see e.g. Adamset al., 2011) or financially supporting national higher education institutions (see e.g. Lomer et al., 2016 on the UK). Our analysis of the political debate in Luxembourg reveals two additional rationales. First, the development of the country's elites and their international network-building as strategies to develop a highly Europeanised country (with a European capital city) through outgoing *and* incoming mobility. Second, the participation in international knowledge-building and brain circulation. We showed that ISM policies in Luxembourg have always been, and are still, integral parts of strategies regarding the economic development and social integration of a country on its way to becoming a knowledge society – and among the fastest growing in Europe.

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- 1 The Greater Region includes: Lorraine (FR), Rhineland-Palatinate (DE), Saarland (DE), Walloon Region (BE), Luxembourg and the German-speaking Communities of Belgium and pursues common strategies on different issues, e.g. spatial development, education, tourism, etc. (<http://www.granderegion.net/La-Grande-Region-en-bref/Strategie>).