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# Is international student mobility still a distinctive strategy? A study of upper milieu students in Germany

Gregor Schäfer <sup>a,b</sup> and Katharina Walgenbach <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark; <sup>b</sup>Institute for Educational Science, FernUniversität in Hagen, Hagen, Germany

## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, the article examines whether international student mobility (ISM) is still a distinctive educational strategy of upper-milieu students in the 21st century. As a result of the Bologna process, ISM has become widespread in Europe. Does this also mean that international mobility loses its distinctive character? Based on current studies that point to a differentiation within ISM, we investigate to what extent students from upper milieus may strive to re-establish the 'structure of distances' - as Bourdieu puts it - in the field of higher education. Our research design consists of 95 qualitative interviews with Master's students in Germany. The study conducts a comparative analysis to differentiate between lower, middle and upper milieus (vertical axis), with the main focus of the research being directed towards the upper milieus. In addition, the differences within upper milieu (horizontal axis) are examined by including three academic disciplines in the research design: management/business administration, medicine, and musicology. The results of our study suggest that, even within the context of a knowledge society, characterised by an increased participation in higher education, there remain numerous symbolic, spatial, and cultural opportunities for students from upper milieus to distinguish their educational paths in distinct ways, e.g. the destinations chosen, the rhetorical framing of international mobility experiences, and the integration with work-related practices beyond the course of study.

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International student mobility; upper class students; distinction; educational strategy

## Introduction

The 21st century has seen a marked increase in the accessibility of higher education, particularly in Europe, where a university degree is no longer the sole preserve of the elite. Based on Bourdieu's diagnosis of 'diploma inflation', it raises the question of how much pressure the 'dominant class' is facing today due to the perceived 'massification' of higher education as a result of this trend. For according to Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, the upper social milieus would always have to strive to maintain the 'structure of the gaps' (Bourdieu 2001, 91) within the field of education. In his study *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), Bourdieu states that the expansion of education in the 1960s has resulted in little more than an upward shift in the social space:

whenever the strengths and efforts of the groups competing for a given type of asset or entitlement tend to balance one another out, as in a race in which, after a series of bursts in which various runners forge ahead or catch up, the initial gaps are maintained. (p. 160 f.)

**CONTACT** Gregor Schäfer  [gregor.schaefer@outlook.com](mailto:gregor.schaefer@outlook.com)  Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, Copenhagen 1353, Denmark

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If the theory of Bourdieu is still suitable for analysing processes of social reproduction, it raises the question of the *educational strategies* adopted by the upper milieus to produce or maintain the structure of distances in the social space. Inspired by Bourdieu's conflict theory, our study focuses on upper-milieu-students, a group often neglected in higher education research, in contrast to first-generation students or elite students. Our main intention is not simply to assess the continued relevance of Bourdieu's theory in the 21st century, but rather to use his framework to analyse contemporary forms of inequality in higher education.

Our qualitative study uses Vester's milieu model, based on Bourdieu's concepts of social space and habitus (Vester et al. 2001). What makes our research project special is that we do not only analyse the strategies of the *elites*, but focus primarily on the study of the *upper milieus*. While our study also examines the social practices of the economic, political, and legal *elites* in the field of education, who, depending on the underlying definition, make up only 1–5% of the population in Germany (Imbusch 2003), we are particularly interested in the educational strategies of the upper milieus, which Vester estimates make up about 20% (Vester 2015). Hence, we are particularly concerned with the cohort of German students positioned within the upper third of Bourdieu's social space. Furthermore, we do not focus our study solely on elite universities with high tuition fees, selective admissions procedures and limited access. In this sense, we assume that the question of the reproduction of upper milieus and the formation of elites *overlap*, but are not *identical*. Consequently, our study is not about elite education, but about the *status reproduction* of upper milieus based on education. This specification is also important because for a long time there was hardly any elite education in Germany after 1945 (Deppe et al. 2018). We also assume that upper milieus are not *homogeneous* (Vester 2003), which raises the question of different educational strategies *within* the upper milieu.

In Germany, international student mobility (ISM) has increased enormously in recent decades (Heublein et al. 2021). Reasons for this include e.g. the immense success of the Erasmus programme as well as internationalisation as a key issue for European universities (Altbach and Knight 2007; Altbach and Wit 2015). As a result, current research suggests that ISM is increasingly losing its distinctive character (Courtois 2018; Teichler 2012). The competition for mobile capital in the present seems to be shifting from mobile vs. non-mobile to the 'iterative process of differentiation within mobility' (Prazeres 2019, 1).

In our view, this trend requires an exploratory research design that allows for a comparative analysis of the different milieus (vertical axis) while also examining the differences *within* the upper milieus (horizontal axis). According to our qualitative research design, we have chosen an open research question: *What is the meaning of international student mobility for students from upper milieus?* In terms of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, this research question does not solely aim at attitudes, opinions or assessments of upper milieus with regard to ISM, but at the analysis of their *implicit knowledge* and *orientations*. Because educational strategies need not necessarily be intentional; they may also consist of pre-reflexive practical knowledge or dispositions. In this article, we will demonstrate how they are utilised to maintain social distance and reproduction in the field of higher education.

### International student mobility (ISM) and strategies of distinction

Statistically, ISM has become quite common in the field of higher education (OECD 2020). In Europe, a central cause of this is the Bologna process, which aimed at the creation of a European higher education area (EHEA) in terms of degrees, study structures and students' mobility (European Ministers of Education 2009). Data suggests a loss of exclusiveness in student mobility in Western Europe, with study abroad becoming a normal activity (Teichler 2012). In Germany, the proportion of students studying abroad increased from 20% in 1991 to 32% in 2000, and has remained relatively stable, with variations by academic fields (Heublein et al. 2021; Prado et al. 2021). Nevertheless, there

are still significant differences in terms of the students' social backgrounds (Key, Milatova, and Horstmann 2017; Lörz and Krawietz 2011; Netz and Finger 2016).

In the research literature, there are a number of studies that directly address the topic of *distinction* through ISM. This research suggests that the perceived 'massification of ISM' leads upper-milieu or elite students to seek out even more exclusive or higher-valued forms of mobility (Courtois 2018; Netz and Finger 2016; Netz and Grüttner 2021; Prado et al. 2021; Waters and Brooks 2010). Of particular interest for our research is the study by Laura Prazeres, which states that mobile students not only strive to distinguish themselves from non-mobile students, *but also from other mobile peers* (Prazeres 2019). This raises the question of whether upper milieus are now aligning their strategies of social reproduction to other forms of international mobility or to new combinations of capital.

## Theoretical background

Theoretically, our research refers to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of reproduction and conflict. By **educational strategies** Bourdieu understands collective and individual practices that the 'dominant class' uses to reproduce their position in social space through education (Bourdieu et al. 1981). For Bourdieu, the term 'strategy' refers to actors' practical sense of the immanent logics of a 'game' in a specific field (Bourdieu 1990). This includes, for example, developing a practical sense of what kind of educational strategies are capable of *making a difference* in the field of higher education, even in an era of perceived 'inflation' of academic qualifications and their associated devaluation (Bourdieu 1984). In this game, the dominant class can deploy higher economic, cultural, symbolic and social capital than middle- and lower-class 'fractions' (Bourdieu 1986). As Bourdieu elaborates in his empirical studies, the habitus of the dominant class also shows a higher 'cultural fit' (Kramer 2014) with the field of higher education, which leads to a higher success in academic studies. In this context, Bourdieu also speaks of 'cultural privileges' in the field of education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979).

It is important to note that the outlined mechanisms of social reproduction should not be seen as deterministic. Cultural capital is not directly inherited and requires permanent individual efforts that can fail (Schmeiser 2003). Moreover, for Bourdieu, educational strategies need not necessarily be conscious or rationally calculated; rather, he assumes an often unconscious relationship between habitus and field (Bourdieu 1993). Social reproduction is not static, but dynamic and contested, in Bourdieu's theory. He argues that the 'system of objective relations' is a 'field of struggle' where social positions are constantly being redefined in relation to one another (Bourdieu 1984).

This conflict perspective also shapes his definition of **distinction**. According to Bourdieu, the dominant class strives to distinguish itself from lower classes by claiming interpretive authority over systems of classification and social order. By exerting control over these systems, the ruling class determines which taste or educational qualifications are considered 'rare' or 'distinguished'. As a result, distinction can only be comprehended in relation to others. When the lower classes adopt something, it loses its distinctive character. 'The dominant culture is always characterised by a distance' (Bourdieu 2015, 39). Following Bourdieu's theoretical considerations, the question arises to what extent the increased participation in the field of higher education leads to distinction struggles. Are educational privileges in the field of higher education under pressure today? What educational strategies do upper milieus use to maintain social distance?

## Methods and data

Our sample consists of 95 qualitative interviews with master's students at 31 comprehensive universities (excluding universities of applied sciences), three medical schools and three music colleges in Germany. The data has been collected in a research project on educational strategies of upper milieus in the field of higher education, funded by the German Research Foundation. The sample was restricted to master's students as it is assumed that their educational strategies become

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

Sample Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Total sample	95
Mobility experience	69
<i>Milieu</i>	
Upper milieu (UM)	48
Middle milieu (MM)	33
Lower milieu (LM)	14
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	37
Female	58
Other	0
<i>Discipline</i>	
Business Administration & Management	25
Medicine	38
Musicology	32
	∅
Average age	25
Average distance of current university to hometown in kilometres (km)	250 km
UM students: distance to hometown	300 km
MM students: distance to hometown	270 km
LM students: distance to hometown	150 km

more defined and complex over the course of their studies. This is reinforced by the fact that most study abroad mobility occurs during the master's programme (Heublein et al. 2021) and mobility patterns become more diverse in later semesters (Finger 2011). The sample characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

The study primarily focuses on students from upper milieus, but in line with Bourdieu's relational approach, interviews were also conducted with students from middle and lower milieus for comparative analysis. The classification of surveyed students into upper, middle, and lower milieus was based on Vester's milieu model. Since Vester's research is mainly quantitative, a specific research design was developed for the current qualitative project to operationalise students' milieu categorisations:

### **Vertical axis**

With regard to the vertical axis, classic social indicators were collected from students such as highest educational degree of parents, current occupation of father and mother, net income of parents. For the milieu classification of the interviewed students, the parental occupations were also classified in Vester's classification system of occupational groups (Vester 2003). According to Vester, membership in a specific occupational group is not only an indicator of vertical differences (level of qualification/level of vocational training), but also of horizontal differentiations. Students were also asked about their parents' assets or net worth, given the option to classify it into five predefined categories (Bundesbank 2019).

### **Horizontal axis**

Bourdieu posits that the dominant class can also be divided further into different class fractions. To operationalise this horizontal axis, the present research design used an *auxiliary construction* by including students from different academic disciplines in the sample. As quantitative studies show, the upper social classes reproduce themselves significantly through specific fields of study (Börjesson and Broady 2006; Georg and Bargel 2016; Multrus 2006). Therefore, the sample focuses on three academic disciplines where the rate of social reproduction of upper milieus is particularly high (Multrus 2006) and where students are trained for occupational groups that can be located in

the upper quadrants of the social space: 1) management/business administration, 2) medicine 3) musicology.

Therefore, it is assumed that there is a *homology* between the three academic disciplines and the upper quadrants of social space (Bourdieu 1984). The underlying assumption is that the three fields of study represent different configurations of capital (Klebig 2021) with the management study programme being more closely linked to economic capital than to cultural capital, whereas the opposite is true for musicology (Middendorf et al. 2017; Ramm and Multrus 2006). Among all study programmes, medicine in Germany has the highest percentage of students from households with higher education background (Middendorf et al. 2017; Multrus 2006). In Bourdieu's model of social space, medical professions are primarily located in the centre of the upper quadrant (Bourdieu 1984).

In summary, the complex research design is intended not only to differentiate between upper, middle and lower milieus, but also to account for our study's initial thesis that upper milieus are not homogeneous. We assume that different schemes of perception, thought and action (in other words: habitus) can be reconstructed in the upper milieu. This will also be reflected in the distinctive strategies with regard to international mobility.

For the data collection we chose the method of the problem-centred interview, which combines narrative and problem-centred elements (Witzel and Reiter 2012). In the narrative part, interviewees were free to talk about anything in their educational biography they found relevant. This has the advantage that it increases the motivation to talk and narrative elements pose more 'dense' information that are important for the chosen analysis, as they are not product of simple question-answer structures. Due to Covid restrictions during the data collections, most interviews were conducted online and all of them were conducted in German. The interviewees received a small financial compensation. The quotes presented in this article are the authors' translations and have been lightly edited to remove verbal pauses. The interviews were analysed using the documentary method (Nohl 2010). This method of analysis proves to be very prolific in explorative studies, as it is not limited to the content of the interview, but also reconstructs the implicit and habitual knowledge of the interviewees, which distinguishes the documentary method from the thematic analysis in qualitative research. With its working steps of 'formulating' and 'reflecting' interpretation, the documentary method explicitly refers to Bourdieu's theory of habitus and Mannheim's sociology of knowledge (Bohnsack 2014). Furthermore, a comparative approach is central to the documentary method. We compared different cases with ISM experience in relation to the same topics – e.g. motivation for ISM – and reconstructed their links with milieu-specific educational strategies. Drawing on Vester's milieu model, we combined the empirical openness of the documentary method with our milieu-theoretical framework (Bourdieu 1984; Vester 2003).

This approach aimed to achieve a high degree of theoretical, methodological and methodical coherence.

## Findings

Mobility experiences as forms of symbolic, cultural or mobile capital (Bourdieu 1984) are just as field-related as other forms of capital, whereas the conversion rate and recognition of capital can vary within different fields and disciplines (Basaran and Olsson 2018). ISM is particularly important in management degree programmes, which is not surprising given that programmes of management and business administration view themselves as a driving force of globalisation (Finardi and Rojo 2015). This idea is effectively transmitted to students and it is only in this sub-sample that study programmes with mandatory semester or internships abroad can be found. While there are differences in distinction strategies related to ISM across disciplines, the following patterns are prevalent across the general sample.

## Economic capital, temporal resources and the realisation of places

The relevance of ISM for a prospective graduate is relational to the amount of economic and time resources required to complete their studies. A stay abroad often places a significant financial and time burden on students. Upper milieu students (UM) typically have more ample budgets, which allows them to adopt a more relaxed attitude towards time and money issues. Their understanding of mobility is based on orientations that go beyond what is simply feasible, unlike lower milieu students (LM) and most middle milieu students (MM), especially those with limited financial support from their parents. Merely being aware of a prestigious and symbolically valuable destination is not enough. For achieving distinction, one has to actually enact it, as Romy critically described for herself:

I would actually have liked to go to the U.S.A., but of course that would have been far too expensive and Erasmus would have been cancelled and that's just another question of feasibility, whether you can actually do it. (Romy, management, middle milieu)

Although she shows a strong orientation towards ISM as a resource of gaining visibility and has had previous ISM experiences, she is not able to top her mobility activities off with a stay in the US, simply because the costs are 'obviously' too high. Her framing reveals that she implicitly knows that the United States as a study destination is reserved for the wealthy. Therefore, she substituted this denied opportunity with an Erasmus semester. While this option was financially feasible for her, it lacks the same level of symbolic power, as she herself notes elsewhere in the interview. The greatest contrast to this can be found in the case of Lisette, who comes from a family with high economic and educational capital:

I thought, all right, I really want to have that experience abroad now, went for an internship to New York after my bachelor's and had also my project experience abroad anyway, because of my numerous internships and full-time jobs. (Lisette, management, upper milieu)

She continues to explain her desire to have a semester abroad in the US soon, as she has 'always wanted to study in America' and leaves no doubt that she will do so before completing her master's degree. Like Romy, Lisette is aware of the symbolic valorisation of studying in the US compared to programmes like Erasmus in the context of her management studies (Rossier and Bühlmann 2018), but unlike Romy, she does not mention financial constraints or other obstacles. On the contrary, Lisette's narration on this stay is brief and swift: she wanted this experience, so she immediately realised it, no strings attached or needing to explain the details. This orientation towards established places of symbolic power in the respective field (e.g. the US) follows dominant rules in the field of management. Whether such an orientation can materialise into action depends on the availability of financial and time resources, as demonstrated.

ISM can also be significant in terms of buying time as the example of Vanessa (medicine, upper milieu) shows. As her German A-level (Abitur) was not sufficient to study medicine at a German university right away, she moved to the US for a couple of years to complete her pre-medical degree.

Once graduated she returned to Germany to a private university, that accepted her based on her American pre-diploma despite her substandard A-level grade. She is one of the few medicine students who envisions an international career as a physician, which would capitalise on her advanced English language skills acquired during her experience abroad in the US. This example illustrates that the distinctive effects of ISM on the social reproduction of upper milieus sometimes manifest themselves only ex-post, cumulatively over time. However, assigning importance to ISM ex-ante is much easier for students with sufficient financial and time resources (Cuzzocrea and Krzaklewska 2022). Thomas (medicine, middle milieu), who lacks these resources, rejects the idea of an exchange semester abroad during his current studies because he is afraid of the additional financial effort. He also sees his advanced age as an obstacle, since he had to wait a long time to start his medical studies due to insufficient A-level grades. His delayed educational path demonstrates how the attributed significance of ISM changes with declining economic and time resources.



## Reasoning for ISM

The motivation for ISM varies within the sample, but also *within* the group of UM students. Nevertheless, it can be noted that UM students, who overwhelmingly have more mobility experience prior to their studies compared to their counterparts from the middle milieus, place more value on linguistic and institutional experience, cultural learning, international professional exchange as well as interacting with new people. With these orientations, they mostly implicitly aim at underlining their international profile, but especially management students also have a clear strategic motivation for ISM as an additional outcome, which aligns with the logic of their field of study (Wedlin 2006). The accumulated knowledge about language, culture and institutions improves their professional profile even if the narrative mainly emphasises personal gains. In line with the documentary method, ISM is not only about formal knowledge, but ‘also about other socially and culturally constructed knowledges’ (Findlay et al. 2012, 128).

This more implicit and playful approach to ISM stems from a socio-culturally and economically secure position, that allows UM students to prioritise the inherent value of mobility over the sheer calculated revenue for their CV or job search (Waters and Brooks 2010). Given that UM students have greater abilities to become and stay mobile (Schäfer 2022) when they commence their studies, they can prioritise mobility goals that are less attainable or unrealistic for lower-milieu students. It can be assumed that, despite its non-work and non-academic focus, this ‘carelessness’ functions as a marker of distinction in work-related settings, as mobility experiences can have a spill-over effect on one’s academic or professional career. However, attending to the horizontal differentiation of UM students, we are also able to observe different approaches to ISM for those with higher cultural but (relatively) lower economic capital and their ‘opposite’ fellow students with higher economic but (relatively) lower cultural capital endowment. Whereas the former fall indeed into the category of predominantly non-economic orientations for ISM described above, the latter take a more economic view of ISM, which is integrated into a wider explicit strategy to maintain or even elevate the high economic status in which they grew up:

If you decide for a country like Nordic Country, which is so high north, and very cold, then friends ask you often: ‘Are you crazy? Why didn’t you go to like Spain, to the Mediterranean Sea?’ I made my decision differently. I saved two modules specifically for my semester abroad and the portfolio of my home university had three foreign universities with such subjects, and these were University 1, University 2, where I ended up now. (Matti, management, upper milieu)

Matti’s motivation is oriented towards the best match between the foreign university’s offerings and his home schedule to perfectly enhance his studies at the end. In that sense, the reasoning of UM students with high economic capital but relatively low cultural capital, like Matti, is not significantly different from those of middle milieus students; rather, their distinctive strategies are based on more expensive and therefore more exclusive forms of ISM (see section before). When economic distinctions are not readily accessible to UM students, they focus more on highlighting their cultural and institutional experiences, which are mainly determined by their immaterial dispositions.

## Attributive relevance of ISM or “the art of selling”

UM students who have spent a long time studying abroad often feel a sense of belonging to the place they were in and they see themselves as distinct and superior to tourists, who they believe have only superficial experiences (Prazeres 2018). In terms of the documentary method, tourists or travellers constitute a negative counter-horizon here. This difference is less stressed by students from middle and lower milieus with ISM, who tend to attribute the relevance of their mobility more to introspective factors rather than comparing themselves to other mobile subjects. This illustrates a relevant difference between UM students and others, in terms of how their ISM is *ex post* ‘sold’, i.e. how they present it and how they integrate it into the bigger picture of a successful and outstanding student path. In order to enact ISM as symbolic capital, it is important for the interviewees to



reproduce it rhetorically as such, particularly when pursuing an international academic career (Findlay et al. 2012). The relative value of ISM can be increased when it is actively connected to future mobility plans, a pattern that was more common among UM students. ISM portrayed as a standalone or even disconnected event in an otherwise sedentary life course, can reduce its distinctiveness, as it may appear arbitrary or even misplaced.

The 'tactful narratives' (Prazeres et al. 2017, 119) of UM students go beyond the mere experience of ISM highlighting the assigned value. It is a value that is particularly known to milieus with higher spatial mobility, who have a more comprehensive understanding of the inherent symbolic capital. Generalised further, this equates to cosmopolitan qualities (Rizvi 2005) or international skills (Teichler 2017), which are seen as desirable outcomes of ISM. Since the legitimacy of distinctive traits such as cosmopolitanism is defined by those milieus that hold the power of definition and exercise symbolic domination in the field and its doxa (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), their incorporation into profitable educational strategies is much easier for students from upper milieus to anticipate and realise. In contrast to other milieus, UM students are able to present their experience in a more compelling and meaningful way, regardless of the actual 'value' of their mobility practices. This is demonstrated by statements that address the needs and expectations in a 'world that is growing ever closer together and we have an increasingly globalised world' (Carla, management, upper milieu).

UM students also emphasised the learning process and development of personal agency through their ISM:

I also think that clinical traineeship and internships abroad can be very formative and you can learn simply so much from that. (Claudia, medicine, upper milieu),

This aligns well with the dominating meritocratic view of success and career. Here, the mobility experience is not only a brief period within the academic CV, but it also permeates through all biographical aspects. Being able to find the appropriate expressions and forms of representation to persuade an audience that the experience is exceptional, is in itself a practice of distinction from those who may have similar mobility experiences, but are unable to frame it as something extraordinary and unique:

[Addressing motivation] Well, just to gain the experience, it looks nice in the CV and, like to see how – how it is abroad. To do research and to see how the conditions are over there. (Martha, Medicine, middle milieu)

Martha's answer, on the other hand, seems rather hesitant, rudimentary, and far less eloquent. This contrasts with the spin of UM students, who attach much more symbolic significance to their narratives of ISM, while at the same time de-thematising its importance for their own life course. But as Bourdieu (1998) pointed out, symbolic power becomes most potent and assertive when obscured.

### **Abroad and busy – accumulation and combination of social practices**

The final but important ISM differentiation between UM students and other students is the emphasis on combining mobility with other study-, work-, or education-related practices. For example, a -voluntary year between school and university, internships, part-time work, research stays, as well as voluntary or humanitarian work during studies. While extra-curricular activities in general are seen by students as a competitive advantage in the labour market (Roulin and Bangerter 2013), participating in these social practices abroad gives them an additional symbolic upgrade, signalling interest and soft-skills beyond the core curriculum, within an international or cosmopolitan mindset. The range of agentic capacities is not only pushed beyond the studied subject, but also across national and cultural boundaries.

UM students accentuate, that 'simply being abroad' is not 'enough', but that it must be connected to a particular activity or occupation. If a destination sounds too much like vacation, it immediately loses its distinctive potential:

There was also the option [in the programme] to withdraw somehow to Bali and to spend somehow half a year on the island. That wouldn't have been quite right. (Tessa, management, upper milieu)

The degradation and invalidation of such a plan is documented in the term 'withdraw' (from the obligation to study) and the emphasis that it is an 'island' (synonymous with vacation). In terms of the documentary method, vacations constitute a 'counter-horizon' (Bohnsack 2014). Instead, Tessa went to the US, a place of symbolic dominance and a more 'serious' place with 'relevant' work of which she had a clear image (Beech 2014). This resonates with findings of quantitative research on ISM in Germany (Multrus 2018), which found that when the majority of students (in Multrus' study, over 80%) are motivated by non-work-related reasons, it is possible to stand out in a distinctive way by using a less prevalent motives such as professional development. Replicating study-related and extra-curricular educational practices can help to sharpen the distinction strategy of upper milieus:

I was, like I said, for one semester in Madrid, that was very, very nice. I did a clinical traineeship in Ecuador last summer and I also liked that. And now I actually plan to go to Moscow in the context of my dissertation. (Ronja, medicine, upper milieu)

Aside from the limitation of mobility activities due to the Corona pandemic, she shows a very strong orientation towards ISM in several educational activities (semester abroad, clinical traineeship, dissertation, practical year), varying countries and even continents. This gives her a comparative symbolic advantage over other students with one-dimensional ISM.

Research- and academic-related ISM is particularly relevant for musicologists, who often work in archives scattered around the world (particularly throughout Europe as historical musicology seems to be a very Eurocentric discipline). Thus, their mobility is mostly focused on archive visits. However, due to the relatively low relevance of ISM in musicology, the symbolic impact of those stays cannot unfold as it does in the other two disciplines.

A specific variant of this pattern is the focus on a particular country and the devotion of all subsequent ISM, such as semesters, internships, work, etc., to that one country. Committing to a country early on and consistently defining one's own profile, specialised in that country, allows the student to 'double the chances someday to be able to develop a source of income, because you simply gain a new country somehow'. (Jerome, musicology, upper milieu). In this case, the marker of distinction is not the ISM *per se*, but rather the specialised profile, in which the ISM plays a constitutive part. As with other international activities, however, this specialisation usually requires pre-accumulated forms of mobility and cultural capital, which UM students are much more likely to draw upon. Figure 1 provides a mind map that summarises the findings of our qualitative research project.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article examined the potential for distinction associated with international mobility, primarily in relation to students from upper milieus, contrasting them with students from middle and lower milieus. Our study focused on upper milieus rather than elites in the strict sense (Vester 2003). Based on recent studies of ISM that indicate a trend of differentiation *within* ISM, we examined how students from upper milieus might re-establish the 'structure of distances' in times of a 'massification' of ISM. Our research design incorporated different academic disciplines to allow us to delve deeper into the distinctions *within* upper-milieus.

This research strategy also proved to be productive in another respect, as the importance of international mobility also varies depending on the fields of study. Whereas ISM is firmly anchored in a field like studies of management, the field of musicology (in Germany) is still strongly domestic, while the field of medicine is in between. This has consequences for ISM-related distinction practices: while it is relatively easy in musicology to distinguish oneself through ISM – though it also receives less recognition within the discipline – management students have to invest much more resources and effort.

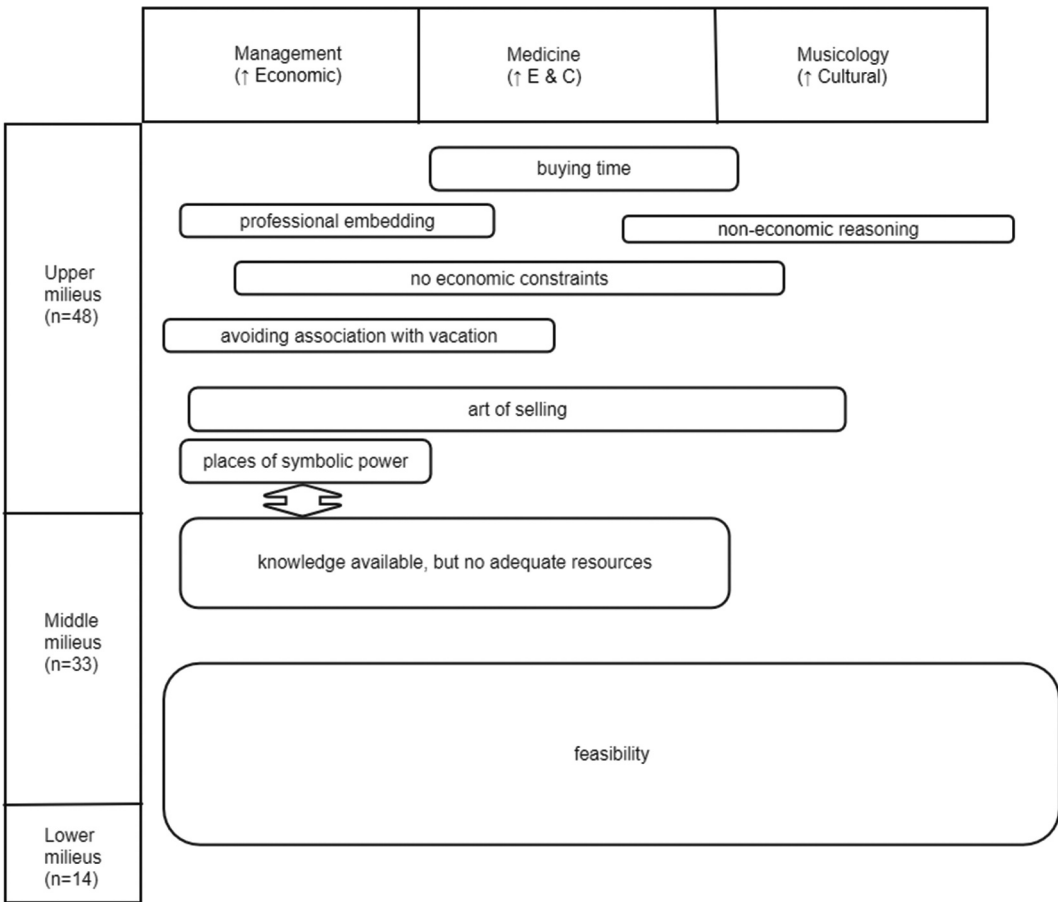


Figure 1. Mind map findings.

Nevertheless, we also found overarching patterns in the meaning of ISM as perceived by upper-milieu students. This includes highlighting extra-curricular activities to distinguish their experiences from simply studying abroad and avoiding destinations that are commonly associated with vacation or leisure. This aligns with previous research that suggests that students from academically-oriented backgrounds are more likely to opt for alternatives to widely-used programmes such as Erasmus (Key, Milatova, and Horstmann 2017; Kratz and Netz 2018). Our research findings also show that the meaning of ISM is shaped by how they are framed and integrated into one’s educational biography (Matthys 2012; Silver 2020). Here we see that UM students are more engaged and reflective in their practices of self-representation, which shows that ISM as symbolic capital also needs to be “enacted” (as the documentary method puts it) and not just accumulated, e.g. by presenting one’s CV as outstanding (Lee 2016). However, upper milieus are not homogeneous. The motivations or orientations that we were able to reconstruct in our material vary between UM students with more cultural capital and those with more economic capital. Whereas the former exhibit a rather non-economical and intrinsic attitude towards ISM, their more financially advantaged UM counterparts act more strategically to optimise their career options (Lynch and Moran 2006). Both approaches prove to be useful in terms of their specific educational strategies, but with completely different orientations related to their positioning in the social space. While one segment of the upper milieu places a greater emphasis on their cultural pioneering work (such as cultivating a cosmopolitan capital or mindset), the other segment strives more for economic hegemony. The different meanings of ISM

also resonate in the respective disciplines, with either the cultural (musicology), economic (management) or a combination (medicine) being perceived as determining the significance of ISM.

Our analysis has clearly indicated that the pressure on upper milieus to establish a distinctive meaning of ISM does not originate from lower milieus, which continue to lack resources (Lörz, Netz, and Quast 2016), but rather from the ambitious middle milieus (Tran 2016). This is in line with previous research on the acquisition of 'cosmopolitan capital' (Weenink 2008). However, knowledge of renowned international institutions of disciplinary excellence alone is not enough, a student must also be able to materialise this knowledge into experience (van Mol and Timmerman 2014). Students from upper milieus still have numerous symbolic, spatial, and cultural opportunities to shape their educational path in relation to ISM: orientation towards destinations of excellence and symbolic domination (which requires economic capital and time resources), the rhetorical embedding of one's own ISM in the image of an outstanding CV, and the interlocking with work-related practices beyond the course of study.

The scope of our article was restricted to examining students who had engaged in some form of ISM. It is worth noting, however, that there were also UM students present in our sample, who had not aspired for distinction through mobility, favouring instead other distinctive educational strategies. In our case study, we only included German students. This leaves open the question of how applicable our findings are to other countries. Even though our initial theoretical considerations on forms of distinction in knowledge societies as well as empirical developments in the internationalisation of higher education (de Wit 2019), suggest this, we believe that this remains, in the spirit of Bourdieu, an open empirical question. Another limitation that must be addressed is the potential bias in our selection of interviewees. Many respondents stated that they participated in the interviews not for the financial incentive, but because they wanted to help, in general or specifically with reference to academic research, and/or they had personal interest in the research topic. This could mean that our interviewees may have higher than average social or academic interest, which might have affected their ISM, e.g. in terms of research-related mobility.

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## ORCID

Gregor Schäfer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7235-6063>

Katharina Walgenbach  <http://orcid.org/0009-0000-8322-7718>

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