

# Being forced? Getting far? Speaking the language? What matters in the process of going abroad as a student?

EMILIA KMIOTEK-MEIER, UTE KARL

**Emilia KMIOTEK-MEIER:** PhD researcher, University of Luxembourg; 11, Porte des Sciences, L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg; emilia.kmiotek@uni.lu

**Ute KARL:** professor, University of Luxembourg; 11, Porte des Sciences, L-4366 Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg; ute.karl@uni.lu

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**ABSTRACT:** Student mobility is a common phenomenon in Luxembourg, as almost every student spends a period abroad before graduating. Based on material from this “hyper-mobile” academic context, we will focus on the first phase of going abroad. First, we will analyse how the idea to study abroad is related to different notions of forced or non-forced mobility. Second, we will turn to the choice of destination, focussing on geographical distance and language distance between the country of origin and the place of destination. Geographical distance is not a goal as such but is a proxy for other dimensions, e.g. greater distance can be equated with a wish to try out new things and start a new life phase while shorter distance emphasises strong embeddedness in pre-existing social ties and obligations. In terms of language, students mostly choose countries where one of Luxembourg’s official languages is spoken (either because they have mastered it or because they would like to improve it for professional reasons), and countries where an additional language can be learnt or practised. Our results show that studying abroad is not the decision of a moment, but rather a process embedded in students’ past, present and future as well as in their social surroundings.

## Introduction

In the EU discourse, (student) mobility can be found as a panacea against all maladies, and also as a help to counteract bypasses at the internal EU labour market (van Ostaijen 2017), by “socialising” young people to be mobile. Indeed, a stay abroad has been shown to have a positive effect on the future international labour mobility of young people (Parey 2011). Furthermore, it supports their employability after graduation in general (Di Pietro 2013; Trooboff, Vande Berg, Rayman 2007; Wiers-Jenssen, Try 2005). Against this backdrop, less surprising is that “Erasmus+ student” is the EU’s mobility



programme with the biggest budget (EC 2017), underlining the hopes put in this type of youth mobility. Despite the positive results reported and financial measures taken, the explicit majority of EU students still graduate without any academic experience abroad.

To explain the gap between political goals and young peoples' reality, research has paid attention to the difference between mobile and non-mobile students while discussing reasons for going abroad. Studies have shown e.g. that those from families with a higher socio-economic background tend to go abroad more often than their peers from less wealthy families (Li, Bray 2006; Lörz, Netz, Quast 2016; Netz, Finger 2016; Netz, Jaksztat 2017; Waters 2012). Additionally, in certain study subjects it is more common to go abroad (Petzold, Peter 2015), discussed by the authors as a "social norm" within an educational context. Additionally, especially previous mobility experiences, the financial situation, and social networks have been shown to contribute significantly to the decision to go abroad (Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Pedro, Franco 2016; Van Mol 2014). However, analyses of factors supporting mobility treated the stay abroad mostly as a momentary rational-choice decision; less emphasis has been placed on explaining studying abroad as a process (but see e.g. Carlson 2013).

We will contribute to these discussions by analysing the process of going abroad of (ex)mobile students from Luxembourg, where student mobility is seen as a national tradition or a "social norm" and where the rate of student mobility is almost 100%, taking into account credit mobility (short stay abroad e.g. Erasmus) and degree mobility (whole study programme abroad) together. In such a context, the widely-used division between mobile and non-mobile students from the literature is not the crucial distinction; the question of how people experience and give meaning to the process of moving abroad is more pertinent. Additionally, we will focus on both credit and degree students, a division underdeveloped in the student mobility research (but see King, Findlay, Ahrens 2010).

The paper will focus on the first phase of the process of going abroad, even before the decision to move has been taken. First, we ask how the idea to go abroad as a student was born. Second, we will investigate the choice of the destination abroad.

Our point of departure will be a short introduction into the Luxembourgian context, very different from most countries researched regarding international student mobility. After the description of methods, we will go on to the analysis section. Two main points will be introduced: the aspect of (non-)forced mobility among Luxembourgian students and the meaning of geographic and linguistic distance/closeness in deciding where to go. The paper will close with discussing those two aspects against the broader context of international student mobility.

## **The (extraordinary) Luxembourgian context of studying abroad**

Compared to other European countries struggling with the requirement to achieve the 20% threshold for mobile students from the Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009), Luxembourg has almost 100% student mobility. The long tradition of degree student mobility, mainly to neighbouring countries (i.e. Belgium, Germany and France), exists because the University of Luxembourg (UL), the only public university of the country, was established just in 2003. Those destinations reflect Luxembourg's official languages that are taught in school and are widely used in the Luxembourgian labour market. However, in recent years the scope of possible destinations has been widening slightly (Kmiotek-Meier, Karl 2016).

Prior to 2003, all young people from Luxembourg seeking tertiary education were forced to graduate abroad. Caused by this tradition, one of the organisational practices of the newly-founded UL was an obligatory semester abroad for all undergraduates (Kmiotek-Meier, Karl, Powell 2017). However, even after the UL's foundation, degree mobility remained the main pathway to obtaining an academic diploma in Luxembourg. The full academic stay abroad is seen as a way to maintain country's future elites (Rohstock, Schreiber 2013) and to secure international professional networks in Luxembourg through private networks of returning graduates. Student mobility, whether degree or credit, is highly supported by politics in Luxembourg (Kmiotek-Meier, Karl, Powell 2017), as indicated by an extra mobility scholarship for all students pursuing their education abroad (additional to the basic scholarship).

## **Methodology**

Our analyses are based on 13 qualitative interviews with (ex)mobile students from Luxembourg. The sample includes both Bachelor and Master students, as well as Master graduates. Different phases regarding studies – during and after – enabled the capturing of different perspectives on studying abroad. Additionally, some interviewees were at the beginning of their studies while some had already graduated. We tried to contact people with student mobility experience “not older” than one year, to be able to capture “fresh” memories. We excluded PhD candidates as the PhD phase can be seen as incorporating both study and employment elements (Romano 2005), and the decision is made after having graduated from a university. Thus, other aspects may also play a role. The starting points of the sampling strategy were the most frequent destination countries among Luxembourgian students. As we followed the logic

Table 1: Sample overview (N=13)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>
Study type	Credit mobility: 5; Degree mobility: 10*
Country of study	Austria: 3; Belgium: 6; England: 2; France: 3; Germany: 6; The Netherlands: 1**
Gender	Female: 7 / Male: 6
Programme	Humanities: 10; Technical and economic sciences: 3

\* One person can have more than one mobility stay abroad, consequently N>13.

\*\* BA/MA/credit could be earned in different countries, consequently N>13.

of grounded theory (see below), our final sample was based on the criteria of being far away from/close to home and being a degree or a credit student, trying also to include students in different study programmes. However, the sample is biased in the direction of humanities (see Table 1). The fieldwork took place in Luxembourg between October 2015 and April 2017.

All material was recorded, transcribed and pseudonymised. The anonymised transcripts were coded by one person, supported by the software MAXQDA. Our analyses followed the grounded theory: After a first coding, we developed hypotheses and, through constant comparison between and within the cases, we developed more conceptual codes and more integrated concepts (Corbin, Strauss 2008). We followed the constructivist approach to grounded theory, acknowledging that the researchers' point of reasoning and the knowledge of previous research flow into the analyses and results presented (Charmaz 2006), thus rejecting "a single reality that a passive, neutral observer discovers through value-free inquiry" (Charmaz 2008, 401). Grounded theory has already proved to be fruitful in migration research in general and in the student mobility research in particular (Dimmock, Ong Soon Leong 2010; Garbati, Rothschild 2016; Jiani 2017), especially when discovering new concepts and connections between different aspects of a phenomenon.

## Results

In the first section, we will concentrate on the idea of studying abroad and discuss the dimension of being forced to go abroad, taking Luxembourgian peculiarities into account. The second part will focus on factors considered while deciding on the destination of the academic stay abroad: geographical and linguistic distance. We will elaborate on these two dimensions as they were mentioned in each single interview, thus emphasising the importance of these dimensions, already discussed in the former research (see the respective sections). Our study adds some new distinctions, e.g. conceptualising geographical proximity as need for independence or safety in the context of maintaining pre-existing social networks.

### *Forced or not-forced – that is the question*

Research on student mobility has highlighted many obstacles and obligations related to becoming mobile. With growing participation in tertiary education worldwide, international student mobility became e.g. a distinction strategy for the middle class (Sin 2009) in securing an adequate social position. Furthermore, certain study programmes (Petzold, Peter 2015) support the decision to go abroad and, thus, may push towards a stay abroad even if not wanted by a person.

For students from Luxembourg, an academic stay abroad is required during the course of their academic trajectory. They either complete the entire study programme abroad, or they leave for a short stay abroad during their undergraduate programme if they study at the University of Luxembourg (the country's only public university).<sup>1</sup> Students respond differently to this obligation, manifested in the form of prescribed mobility. For most interviewees, the forced dimension is not visible or problematic at all, as they consider it a normality. Interestingly, those who study abroad because their programme cannot be completed in Luxembourg do not refer to their time abroad as forced mobility; rather, they relate it to the tradition and normality of studying abroad among the Luxembourgian youth: Celine (line 31–34): *“For many subjects there are also no really good programmes offered or no programmes at all, that's why it was for me never in question, to study in Luxembourg, it was just totally normal to study abroad.”*<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, some of the credit mobile students are not against the institutionally prescribed stay abroad. Most of them were accepted at a foreign university, but decided to stay in Luxembourg to study; this shows that they were ready to spend their “academic life” abroad. Those credit students willing to go abroad also refer to the normality of student mobility among their peers. However, at the same time, they use words such as “must” or “obligation” in their narrations. Thus, even if they are willing to spend some time at a foreign institution, the obligatory aspect remains prevalent in the narration: Diana (line 53–54): *“In my programme it is like that, that we must go abroad for one semester. But I would have done it anyway, because I find it very nice and also good.”*

In contrast to students with a positive attitude towards studying abroad, there are also narrations – only from credit students – criticising the formalised stay abroad required by the University of Luxembourg. As they chose to stay in Luxembourg to study, some feel institutionally forced to leave for one semester: Henriette (line 793–803): *“So I do not understand also, why it is an obligation here, why the Uni Luxembourg thinks, it must send everybody abroad. (...) I do not understand. I think still it is not a good idea to force us (...) even though I made a good experience.”*

Some of those not willing to go have already had negative experiences studying for a degree at a foreign university, and feel scared or insecure about doing so again. These students are not sure if they would be able to manage to

leave again or hold out even for a short credit mobility. Esther (line 51–54): “Because I was sceptical (...) I was very nervous already one year before. I thought: Nooooo, how should it work?”

From the life course perspective (Elder 1994), we can link our observations with two aspects: 1. the sequencing of biographical events – especially seen in the link between a failed stay abroad as a degree student and insecurity about credit mobility in the subsequent study programme at the UL and 2. the idea of linked lives in the case of traditional studies abroad, where, for former cohorts, it was normal to study abroad.

The narrations presented indicate that the notion of forced mobility may have been an outcome of change in the Luxembourgian higher education landscape since the foundation of the University. Older cohorts of interviewees did not see the University of Luxembourg as a real option while considering the place of study. Consequently, for them the only way to study was a continuous study abroad; they did not feel forced while leaving for a foreign university, as the circumstances created a certain normality for all. However, for younger interviewees, the alternative of studying at the University of Luxembourg is more present in their decision spectrum. At the same time, the undergraduate study programmes include in their curricula an obligatory stay abroad based on the law of the University. This may cause a feeling of being forced to act against their will by the institutional norms and regulations.

### ***How to go abroad? – A matter of distance***

The geographical distance between the place of origin and the destination place turned out to be crucial to understanding how the process of going abroad is being shaped by those who must go. During the analysis, other notions of distance also proved relevant: emotional distance from friends or parents, power distance from parents, cultural distance including different sub-dimensions as e.g. language distance or religious distance. As we cannot address all these dimensions, we will focus in the following on the meaning of 1. the geographical distance and 2. the perceived distance to the language of the country of destination in the process of choosing the destination abroad.

#### ***Geographical distance – getting far from or close to social networks in the country of origin***

At the very beginning of migration research, distance was already taken into account in gravity models as a factor negatively correlated with the decision to move (see e.g. Ravenstein 1889 in Lee 1966). With regard to student flows, similar findings were made mostly in quantitative analyses (see e.g. Barnett et al. 2015; Beine, Noël, Ragot 2014; Levatino 2017; Perkins, Neumayer 2014; Rodriguez-Gonzalez, Bustillo Mesanza, Mariel 2011; Shields 2016 but see

Kubiciel-Lodzińska, Ruszczak 2016 where only 15% respondents name the geographical distance as a reason to move to Poland). Interestingly, in the study of Bessey (2012) on students' flows to Germany, the continent and not the geographical distance appeared as significant, supporting the idea that "distance usually picks up the impact of transportation costs and psychological costs of being abroad" (Beine, Noël, Ragot 2014, 47). Thus, geographical distance is a substitute for other characteristics, also students' financial situation and probably the socio-economic background.

In each interview, the topic of geographical distance is mentioned and discussed, thus showing the relevance of this criterion. We observed two main groups: those who chose to study at a higher education institution near the Luxemburgian border and those who wanted to go "farther away". There was always a rationale behind the choice of the distant/near location, so the distance, far or close, is never a goal itself, confirming the previous findings on this subject.

For the interviewees, going a greater distance is firstly a means to prevent frequent returns back home, as returning home would mean a longer trip and an additional (and substantial) financial burden. Furthermore, rarely going back to Luxembourg is named as a help to get rooted in the new place, to emerge in the new surroundings without being distracted by the old one and to "enable students to escape, through mobility, their former lives and start anew" (Conradson, Latham 2005; Waters, Brooks, Pimlott-Wilson 2011, 466). Diana (line 57–59): *"I sought for something that is really far away, because I said: I am four months away, I have the possibility not to be home, then I do not want to be seduced to return home."*

Secondly, some interviewees express that a greater distance helped them avoid too much contact with Luxembourgian students. All interviewees, even those who decided to go to a farther destination, relate it to Luxembourgian students' general preference to go to destinations near Luxembourg. Consequently, deciding on a destination farther away, some of the interviewees tried to escape *"the Luxembourgian clan"* (Anna, line 94). These insights are, on the one hand, similar to previous findings: "being related to others also implies that the way students react to these ties can impinge on their mobility trajectories" (Carlson 2013, 176). On the other hand, in the Luxembourgian context, a question of choosing a destination that is far away is equal to the question of choosing a destination abroad, and thus is linked with a transition to another societal context and system. On the contrary, for students in other countries, being far from home does not necessarily mean going abroad. The argumentation of being far away underlines the willingness to arrive in the new place and to try out new things without finding oneself confronted with the same people, values and ideas as at home: Max (line 96–101): *"Firstly, I wanted to go farther away, because, in Luxembourg it is like... many people go just in the nearest big cities (...). They are all favourite academic cities for*



*Luxembourgers, because they are not that far away from Luxembourg. And eh, but I wanted, I did not want that all, because there are so many Luxembourgers."*

Logically, the other group – of those who preferred to stay closer to their home – argues in the opposite way. They underline the wish to go back home frequently due to their closeness with family, friends and other significant people (compare Holdsworth 2009). Those who "place higher importance on family-friendly environment" (Hercog, van de Laar 2017, 749) or "are restrained by family and other personal relations" (Beerkens et al. 2016, 189) are reluctant to go abroad. Translated to the Luxembourgian context, where everybody must go away, the reluctance to go would mean choosing a closer university.

In contrast to previous research, where work commitments have been named as a tie preventing students from studying abroad (Beerkens et al. 2016), our interview partners have not named this reason. This is probably due to the privileged financial situation in Luxembourg. Additionally, those who have a regular job can avoid the stay abroad as undergraduate students of UL, and thus are not in our sample.

Narrations of those staying close to Luxembourg often refer to the normality of Luxembourgian students. However, these fragments have an undertone of self-justification trying to explain why one has not gone farther away: Karl (line 46–48): *"I could come home almost every weekend or every second weekend, it was no problem. Yes. That's why [town A, Germany] is actually so popular among Luxembourgers."*

Additionally, the close-to-Luxembourg destination is often chosen by those whose first attempt to study abroad, be it far from or close to Luxembourg, was unsuccessful. They decide to stay close to their home so that, in case they could not manage to live abroad for a longer period, they give themselves the option for frequent (often weekly) trips back home. In these cases, there is a straightforward link between previous mobility experiences and subsequent study destinations abroad.

From those two basic patterns of preferring close or faraway destinations, we discovered a third pattern linking the two together. Many of those preferring a close destination for the first study (mostly Bachelor) programme decided to go farther away for their Masters, or even to change university during the Bachelor degree to go farther away. This development can be discussed against the backdrop of a life course perspective and research on transitions to adulthood (King et al. 2016) that show how young people strive for independence and free themselves from old obligations and patterns. However, it is also true that those who went farther away for their first academic experience move closer to home at the second academic level.

Interestingly, those two different modes of choosing a destination abroad seem to be two parts of one common pattern. Some go farther when they begin



their studies and then move closer to home when older; others go cautiously step by step, choosing first a nearby destination and then moving farther away. In this way, students seem to reunite their various needs (but only at different stages of life and studying): being close to home and building up a new “life”.

### ***Language distance***

Language is an aspect of culture widely discussed in the literature on student mobility. It has been considered as “a large barrier, which can prevent people taking part in ISM [international student mobility]” (Rodriguez-Gonzalez, Bustillo Mesanza, Mariel 2011, 423). Thus, language proximity may support students’ flows between countries (Beine, Noël, Ragot et al. 2014; Vögtle, Fulge 2013). At the same time, the wish to improve language skills is one of the main reasons for choosing to study abroad (Rodriguez-Gonzalez, Bustillo Mesanza, Mariel 2011; Van Mol, Timmerman 2014). In the discussion of language in the context of international student mobility, English has been given special treatment, as countries whose official language is English have the highest incoming student numbers (Beine, Noël, Ragot 2014). However, as more and more countries offer programmes taught in English at reasonable prices (Urbanovic, Wilkins, Huisman 2016) and certain groups of students prefer other linguistic settings corresponding more to the demands of the national markets, e.g. French in Africa (Lasanowski 2011), the hegemony of English-speaking countries in recruiting students from abroad has been diminishing recently (OECD 2013).

Language is a topic mentioned in every narration, and it proves to be an important element while deciding on the destination. Two main argumentation lines are named regarding the influence of language preferences on the choice of the destination abroad: linguistic confidence and/or language requirements in the envisaged carrier.

Students from Luxembourg, both credit and degree, decide mostly on a stay in a neighbouring country. One of the reasons, discussed above, is the geographic proximity. However, language also plays an important role, as students mostly choose to move to a country where one of Luxembourg’s official languages is spoken: French or German, both languages of the Luxembourgian educational system. Thus, in some narrations it is difficult to name the most important influence as they intertwine.

However, for some, language is the pivotal criterion to choose a destination, as they relate it not only to particular destinations but to German- or French-speaking countries. Interestingly, while referring to the language criterion, (ex)students justify their choice by a negative evaluation of one of the two languages: *Nina (line 20): “German is not really my language.” Karl (line 339): “I am absolutely no French-fan.”* These narrations draw again a bridge to the Luxembourgian tradition, where it is “normal” to study in French or German as students do not refer to other languages in their justifications.

However, language confidence and personal preferences are often overshadowed by anticipated requirements of future professions. Even if students confess to feeling more secure in German, they go to French-speaking countries to be adequately equipped for the labour market of the future profession. Indeed, French is the dominant language of the Luxembourgian working world (Pigeron-Piroth, Fehlen 2015) as reflected by the interviewees: Gabrielle (line 29–31): *“I chose it as I wanted to improve my French because I am not that good in French but I’ll need it then in my profession.”*; Lucas (line 154–161): *“Now you know why neither Germany nor Austria came into my mind before. (...) French is important here, on the labour market (...) It is because it would have not been that good to do it in German.”*

In contrast to the rest of the world, English-speaking programmes are chosen only by a few Luxembourgian students in the sample. The arguments for studying in this language are either of a professional nature or reflect a personal wish to learn it properly – hence, similar to those presented above, but argued with more emotional attachment than in the case of French or German.

As discussed before, geographical distance may be a substitute for transportation costs (Beine, Noël, Ragot 2014), and thus of social background. In one of our interviews, another reference to social distinction was made regarding language and the place for studying: Karl (line 270–273): *“I think it is also a status issue in Luxembourg, those who have money they go then... to Unis in London, so farther away and eh, where you can, no idea, where you can later say: I was there.”*

Language of study can therefore become an additional social distinction. Those who can afford tuition fees and living costs in the main knowledge centres will try to get their placement there, to distinguish themselves from others studying at universities within nearer regions. This phenomenon may be compared to the idea of studying abroad itself, exerted less frequently by “new student groups” than by their middle-class peers. These findings give additional hints as to what happens if student mobility is not a major possibility for social distinction regarding higher education, but a tradition and normality. Apparently, there is always place for new divisions and ways of social distinction. This evidence may be particularly puzzling in Luxembourg, a country with a high standard of living and generous state allowances for students, and should be addressed in the future research.

## Conclusion

Despite multiple studies focussing on the differences between non-mobile and mobile students, the question “Go or stay?” may not be the adequate one in every context, e.g. in Luxembourg with an almost 100% student mobility rate.

The reasoning based on Luxembourgian peculiarities may also provide important hints for other contexts in which a certain social class or academic habit includes student mobility as a normality.

One of the striking findings was that Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) notion of mobility capital can turn to a *mobility burden* in a context, where a student is expected to be mobile. The dimension of forced/not-forced student mobility shows that young peoples' perspective can vary even if they come from the same context, due to their biographies; this is especially true when it comes to former experiences of studying abroad. It may thus happen that those who are really forced to go (as they cannot study their subject in the country of origin) do not feel forced at all as they consider it a normality. Simultaneously, those who actually wanted to study abroad before, feel forced to go even for a semester abroad if movement is the result of an institutional obligation. Especially if they have gone through negative experiences before, they would prefer to stay but are forced to leave, facing the legal norm of studying abroad for at least one semester while registered at UL.

The aspect of being forced may help decide how and where to go. As aforementioned in the introduction, in the Luxembourgian context the division into mobile and non-mobile students is practically non-existent. Our findings reveal that this division is (at least partly) replaced by those who search for further distances and those who prefer to keep the distances small as those who are reluctant to go decide rather for destinations close to the Luxembourgian border. Our analysis further showed that a norm of studying abroad, be it as a degree or credit mobile student, does not homogenise the patterns, but allows for building new ones as young people exert their agency through new strategies in a given context (Luxembourg).

We have discussed how geographical distance in the process of going abroad is used to reach another goal, frequently to enable emotional distance from or maintain existing social networks. Most interviewees combine stays at near and far distances during their entire tertiary education. Different meaning is given to the languages spoken in the country of destination. People either decide on a destination that linguistically supports their career path or on countries with languages they already speak at a satisfactory level. The elimination of language distance helps mobile students cope with distance in new social relationships upon arrival at a new place. Thus, language pre-knowledge may be seen as a cushioning factor in the process of integrating at a new place abroad.

By taking into account the findings presented in this paper with regard to forced/non-forced mobility and geographic/linguistic distance, we may draw the conclusion that the reasons for and the way of going abroad are not only motivated by preferences for a particular country or city or higher education institution, as those aspects are interwoven and students decide rather globally. Also, past experiences and future plans – in line with the life course perspective

(Elder 1985) – play a role while deciding on the stay abroad. Thus, student mobility should be seen as a process taking place simultaneously on many levels, rather than as a singular decision embedded only in the present temporality.

One limitation of this study is the narrow context – i.e. considering only one country and including predominantly students from the field of humanities. Future research could pay attention to the linkage between study programmes and the choice of destination, including the country (distance and language), city and destination institution. Although these three dimensions were closely linked in our data, it would be interesting to analyse if and how the meaning and weight of each differ in a particular context.

A further point for future research is the notion of mobility itself. As shown in our material, some mobilities were so close to the parental home that it was possible to go back home every weekend. These ongoing movements back and forth reflect commuting patterns rather than international student mobility as understood in the existing literature. Thus, more attention should be paid to the mobility patterns and strategies young people have developed facing the more and more mobile world.

## Notes

- 1 There are some exemptions from the obligation to stay abroad as an undergraduate, e.g. if a student is already working with a contract outside the university, has a child or has disabilities.
- 2 Translation from German: authors; also with regard to all other citations. All names have been changed. Numbers in parentheses indicate the transcription lines.

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