



Report on the evaluation of the Department of Living Conditions (DoLC) at the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER)

**Based on a peer review as commissioned by the Ministry of
Higher Education and Research of Luxembourg**

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1. Introduction

The Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR) of Luxembourg mandated *Interface Policy Studies Research Consulting*, Switzerland, to organise and lead a research evaluation of the Centres de Recherche Publics (CRPs).

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg operates three non-university public research and technology institutions. They are the Luxembourg Institute of Science and Technology (LIST), the Luxembourg Institute of Health (LIH) and the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER). The three CRPs include departments linked to different scientific disciplines. The evaluation focused on the research performance of the CRP's departments.

The research evaluation was conducted in 2022 and followed two earlier evaluations carried out in 2012 and 2018.¹ This report presents the evaluation of the Department of Living Conditions (DoLC) of LISER.

The observations and recommendations presented in this report are based on a peer review by the following three experts working in the departments' research fields:

- Prof. Dr. Massimo Bordignon, Professor of Public Economics, Catholic University of Milan, Italy
- Prof. Dr. Emily Grundy, Professor of Population Science, University of Essex, United Kingdom
- Prof. Dr. em. Wiemer Salverda, Professor emeritus of Labour Market and Inequality at the Amsterdam Centre for Inequality Studies and Director emeritus of the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

The peer review consisted of a self-assessment report written by the DoLC and a hearing at the department that took place in August 2022. The assessment period runs from 2018 to 2021. The hearing, which was organised and moderated by Interface, comprised a presentation by the department, a group discussion of the self-assessment report and several individual and group interviews. These included interviews with the Head of department, the transversal research programme leader, principal investigators (PI), members of the research staff and PhD students as well as clients and business partners. The agenda of the hearing can be found in the appendix. The report was finalised by Stefan Rieder and Kristin Thorshaug of Interface.

¹ Between 2010 and 2012, evaluations of selected departments of the former CRPs were carried out. The first full evaluation of the CRPs, which included all departments, was carried out in 2018.

The overall results of all departmental evaluations are summarised in an institute report for each CRP² and a synthesis report³. The institute report includes an assessment of the CRPs as a whole. It also summarises the findings from additional governance interviews with representatives of the government commissioner, the board of directors and the executive management of the CRPs as well as a comparison between the CRPs and a foreign benchmark institute.

The department report is structured into two parts: the first part discusses in detail the observations gathered by the expert team during the evaluation process. This part focuses on the input, output and outcome/impact of the department:

- *Input* includes the preconditions for the research conducted, such as strategies, financial and human resources, infrastructure, organisation and external research, industry and other collaborations.
- *Output* includes the performance of the department, exemplified through research and innovation results and their dissemination.
- *Outcome and impact* refer to the medium- and long-term effects as well as the relevance of the output on science, society, economy and public administration/politics.

The second part presents the expert team's overall assessment and recommendations for further developing existing strengths and overcoming observed weaknesses.

² Rieder, Stefan; Haefeli, Ueli; Thorshaug, Kristin (2023): Report on the evaluation the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER), Interface Policy studies Research Consulting, Lucerne and Lausanne.

³ Rieder, Stefan; Balthasar, Andreas; Haefeli, Ueli; Grosjean, Nicolas; Büchler, Chiara; Essig, Stefan; Thorshaug, Kristin (2023): Synthesis report on the evaluation of the Centres de Recherche Publics (CRP) in Luxembourg, Interface Policy studies Research Consulting, Lucerne and Lausanne.

2. Detailed results of the evaluation

2.1 Description of the department

The DoLC was established in 2014 as a part of the then newly created LISER, with its origins in the research activities of the LISER's predecessor institute CEPS/INSTEAD. The DoLC aims to contribute to a better understanding of the drivers of inequality, poverty and social cohesion, both in the short and long term, and of the role, effectiveness and sustainability of social policies and the welfare state. To this end, the DoLC conducts research on policy-relevant topics in the areas of public policies, welfare and socio-economic inequalities. The department is characterised by a multi- and interdisciplinary approach, participating in LISER's transversal research programmes "Health and health systems" and "Crossing Borders". The target groups of the department's research activities are the national and international scientific community, stakeholders and public policy actors, and the general public.

Until 2018, the DoLC was structured as three research teams: "Income, wealth and poverty", "Childhood, family and education", and "Health". In 2019, the research teams were dismantled. Today, the DoLC is structured as a project-driven organisation with two departmental committees: the Scientific Coordination Committee and the Societal Impact Committee. The Scientific Coordination Committee is responsible for identifying long-term scientific challenges and developing strategies, while the Societal Impact Committee is responsible for developing a long-term societal impact plan. Both committees support the department head, the PI and the researchers. In 2021, the DoLC had a total of 48 employees (full time equivalent: 42.3). The department's activities are financed by the state block grant and by third-party funding (competitive grants and contract research). In 2021, the third-party funding under DoLC management supervision amounted to around 4.9 million euros, 69 per cent of which stemmed from international and national competitive grants.

2.2 Input

2.2.1 Strategy

In the 2018 evaluation, the research agenda of the DoLC was viewed as clear, unique and ambitious. This assessment is largely supported by the experts in the 2022 evaluation, who note the DoLC's clear vision and mission, as well as clearly defined overarching objectives and target groups. The experts identify a clear focus among the department's staff on the importance of societal impact. They have the clear common objective of contributing to policy analysis and possible needs for change. The research agenda is accompanied by a clear market strategy with a funding portfolio that includes the core grant, contract research for the public sector and competitive funding.

The experts note that the DoLC is active in a large number of research areas. On the one hand, the department focuses on its central research topics such as inequality, poverty and policy evaluation. On the other hand, there has been a dynamic development of new research areas within the department (e.g. environment). The expansion and adjustment of research topics is also visible in the bibliometric evaluation, with a strong fluctuation in the number of topics and corresponding publications.

Due to the multitude of research areas, the experts find it somewhat difficult to identify a clear strategic thematic positioning of the DoLC. The experts agree with the department's

strategic decision to expand its research topics. Some of these emerging areas, such as health and environment, should enable scientific and societal impact. However, the experts see a risk of fragmentation of the research agenda, as too much diversification could reduce the department's competitive advantage in its core areas of expertise. The experts therefore advocate a timely monitoring of this risk.

2.2.2 Human and financial resources, infrastructure and equipment

At the beginning of 2019, a new Head of department for the DoLC was appointed. According to the experts, this appointment has been instrumental in ensuring that the department's performance has continued to develop positively during the evaluation period. The DoLC has seen a large increase in its human resources during the evaluation period, with a 41 per cent increase in staff between 2018 and 2021. The experts note that the department's staff is balanced in terms of gender and age.

The number of fixed-term contracts in the DoLC is high and has more than doubled during the evaluation period (from 10 to 23). In the experts' opinion, this reflects the department's new project-oriented organisation. The experts consider it important that the department ensures a suitable balance between junior and senior staff to ensure that senior staff are not overburdened with administrative and supervisory tasks.

The experts identified two issues related to the increase in staff and fixed-term contracts.

1. Firstly, the increase in the number of staff has put a strain on the department's infrastructure, with increasingly limited office space.
2. Secondly, due to legal limitations on fixed-term contracts⁴ and apparent national restrictions in the growth of permanent positions, the DoLC – and likely LISER at large – faces challenges in retaining promising junior researchers. Although LISER offers information on the career opportunities at the institute, the constraints nonetheless seem to lead to insecurity and frustration among junior staff on fixed-term contracts. Furthermore, there is a risk that the workload of permanent staff will increase due to fluctuations in the temporary staff. These fluctuations necessitate a careful human resources strategy.

In the 2018 evaluation, the experts noted that the DoLC had been very successful in raising funding. This positive development has continued in the 2018-2021 evaluation period. The experts find the increase in external funding at the DoLC impressive, with significant development in both international competitive grants (notably Horizon 2020) as well as international and national contract research. The financial data in the self-assessment report shows that the DoLC's third-party funding has increased steadily in recent years and has consistently exceeded 70 per cent of the department's total expenditures. In the experts' opinion, the positive development in third-party funding illustrates that the DoLC has been successful in combining scientific excellence and societal impact. The experts see potential for further improvement in international funding, especially funding from the European Research Council (ERC).

⁴ According to the Labour law (Code du Travail), the duration of a fixed-term contract cannot exceed two years, including renewals (fixed-term contracts may be renewed twice). For contracts concluded between a public research centre and researchers, the maximum duration of fixed-term contracts is extended to five years, including renewals.

2.2.3 Organisation

In the 2018 evaluation, the experts recommended that the collaboration between the three research teams of the DoLC should be further strengthened. Since then, the research teams have been dismantled in favour of a project-oriented organisation. The experts recognise great organisational efforts during the evaluation period to transform the structure of the department. According to the experts, the new Head of department has done an excellent job in implementing the recommended restructuring of the department, engaging with all staff, both permanent and temporary, and developing a future-oriented vision that builds on the skills and experience of the researchers. According to the experts, the organisational change has had a positive impact on the department's research activities, particularly through increased internal exchange and collaboration among the department's researchers. The DoLC is characterised by a positive working environment, open communication and highly motivated staff. The department's staff are actively encouraged to work on both scientific and policy-oriented research and to ensure high-quality output and impact. The department's decision to establish internal committees on scientific and societal impact activities is praised by the experts, as the committees provide competent support to the DoLC researchers. Despite these positive aspects, the experts note that the project-driven organisational structure of the DoLC with a flat hierarchy may lead to an increased workload, especially for the Head of department. The Head of department is currently focusing on consolidating the new organisational structure. The experts support this decision, as a consolidation is important to further anchor the structural successes achieved so far.

The "Health and Health Systems" transversal research programme was launched by LISER in 2017 with the objective to bring together and stimulate research in and across all departments. While researchers from all three departments contribute to the programme's output, the programme manager and the immediate programme staff are organisationally affiliated to the DoLC. The experts view the departmental anchoring of the transversal research programme as rather weak. In the experts' opinion, the successes of the programme to date have been highly dependent on the accomplishments of the programme manager and researchers on fixed-term contracts. According to the experts, the programme would benefit from a strengthening of its human resources, including an increase in staff on permanent contracts.

2.2.4 External research and industry collaboration and service provision

The experts note that the DoLC collaborates with a number of international and national partners in the scientific community and that the researchers are active in various networks worldwide. The experts also note the extensive service provision of the DoLC through contract research on behalf of public policy actors in Luxembourg and abroad, especially on behalf of national ministries. In the experts' opinion, the output and impact of the research activities at the DoLC clearly profits from this external cooperation. Due to LISER's increased focus on the research topic of health and health systems, the experts consider the collaboration with the University of Luxembourg and the Luxembourg Institute of Health to be particularly important for the DoLC (and the other departments of LISER).

2.3 Research and innovation performance

2.3.1 Quality of output

The experts of the 2022 evaluation conclude that the DoLC produces output of good quality, thereby confirming the conclusions of the experts in the 2018 evaluation. In particular, the publications of the "Health and Health Systems" transversal research programme are considered by the experts to be qualitatively strong. In addition, the department has been able to achieve high impact publications through collaboration with

visiting researchers. In the experts' opinion, the topics represented in the publications are in line with the research strategy of the department, with a clear focus on the core topics of inequality, poverty and social issues. At the same time, the experts note a clear attempt to expand into growing areas in the international research landscape (such as housing, health and environment).

The bibliometric analysis shows that the DoLC displays an overall slightly above-average performance in terms of field-weighted citation impact in the evaluation period. At the same time, the department's share of top 10 per cent cited and top 10 per cent journal publications has decreased. This may indicate a publication strategy that emphasizes quantity over quality, a trend also noted by the experts in the 2018 evaluation. According to the experts, the DoLC's ability to publish in top journals is naturally limited due to its dual mission of academic and policy-oriented research. In addition, the high number of temporary staff (especially PhD students) may reduce the department's proportion of publications in top journals, as these employees may not yet be able to submit to top-level publications. The experts thus identify room for improvement as regards publications in top journals and the need for an assessment of the overall publication strategy. Ensuring output of high quality is seen as important for the future of the DoLC and its international weight and prestige, which in turn affects its ability to attract highly qualified PhD students, postdoctoral researchers and visiting scholars. At the same time, the experts recognise the need for young researchers to have an adequate number of publications. A balance must therefore be achieved between quality and quantity of output. According to the experts, a visiting programme could further improve the quality of the department's research and allow easier access to highly respected scientific journals.

Through its contract research, the DoLC produces reports for international and national organisations. While some public partners are very satisfied with the output of the contract research, other partners express some reservations concerning the quality and timeliness of the research performance in contract research. According to the experts, this may be traced back to insufficient quality control of the planning and implementation of contract research. It may potentially also be a sign of high workload for department staff. Considering the importance of contract research for the funding of the department, the experts identify a clear need to ensure the satisfaction of contract research clients.

2.3.2 Quantity of output

The experts assess the quantity of research output during the evaluation period as high, with a clear increase in the number of publications in total and per full-time researcher in the evaluation period. The experts also note a variety of types of output (e.g. refereed journals, book chapters and reports), reflecting the combined focus on academic and contract research. According to the experts, the volume of output is adequate given the resources of the department, especially considering the particularly large amount of contract research. Encouragement of policy-oriented staff to expand their skills and interests within scientific research and increased collaboration between policy-oriented staff and other researchers (both inside and outside the DoLC), are possible measures to increase the output of scientific publications.

The department has a high level of interdisciplinary output. In the experts' opinion, this can be attributed to the project-oriented organisation of the department and the transversal research programmes of LISER. The experts note that a considerable number of publications can be attributed to the "Health and Health Systems" transversal research programme, which brings together researchers from the different departments of LISER. The programme is characterised by a particularly high output, both in absolute terms and in terms of the number of publications in top journals. According to the experts, the

impressive performance of "Health and Health Systems" is of particular credit to the programme manager.

In the experts' opinion, the staff's participation and the department's organisation of scientific and public events is in line with what is to be expected from a research institute of this size. It should also be borne in mind that the number of events drastically decreased during the evaluation period due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

2.4 Outcome and impact

The experts assess the scientific impact of the DoLC in the research community as quite robust. Particularly in the department's field of specialisation (inequality, poverty and social welfare), the experts note a clear influence, both theoretically and through applied means. The experts believe that microsimulation models are at the heart of the research conducted at the DoLC and are the main reason why the department is well known in the research community. According to the experts, this is a comparative advantage that must be maintained and further invested in. The impact in the newly defined research areas is still limited, which is understandable given that the department is still in an investment phase. The experts note that the Luxembourg framework may offer limited opportunities for generalisations relevant to a wider European audience. According to the experts, increased international cooperation and a focus on methodological advances could increase the relevance of the department's research to a wider audience.

The experts identify a wide range of impacts stemming from the research activities of the DoLC, especially in terms of societal impact. The department is a valued and sought-after partner for national and international public authorities, developing knowledge that serves as an important basis for national and international policy decisions. Examples include the "Establishment and Management of a Social Policy Network" (ESPN) and the contribution to the Covid-19-task force. According to the experts, the DoLC benefits from being one of the few research institutions working in this field in Luxembourg, giving the department a clear competitive advantage. However, realizing the potential for social impact depends on the quality of the research performance. As mentioned earlier, the satisfaction of public partners with the quality of collaboration and output varies. This may reduce the societal impact of the DoLC.

The experts are of the opinion that the visibility of the department's contribution to research and society could be improved. This was also noted by the experts in the 2018 evaluation, who identified a need to better explain the societal relevance and impact of the department's work. In this respect, the experts see clear potential for the department's established Social Impact Committee to improve the visibility of impact.

3. Overall assessment and recommendations

3.1 Overall assessment

The DoLC bases its research activities on a clear vision and mission. In addition to the core research areas of inequality, poverty and policy evaluation, the department is active in a number of emerging research topics such as housing, health and environment. This is an appropriate response to the changing thematic priorities in science and society. However, due to the large number of research areas covered, there is a risk that the research activities might become too fragmented.

The DoLC undertook an organisational restructuring during the evaluation period by dismantling its research teams and adopting a project-based organisation. The Head of department has been successful in reducing the complexity of the organisation and creating a work environment characterised by highly motivated staff and interdisciplinary collaboration. The DoLC has experienced a large increase in human resources during the evaluation period, particularly in temporary contract staff. The increase in staff has put a strain on the department's infrastructure as office space becomes increasingly scarce. In addition, there seem to be some insecurity and frustration among employees on fixed-term contracts regarding their long-term career opportunities at the department.

The DoLC has experienced impressive growth in external funding, both through international and national competitive grants and through contract research. In addition, the department has had good research performance in both qualitative and quantitative terms. In particular, the "Health and Health Systems" transversal research programme has performed impressively. The DoLC is a valued and sought-after partner for public authorities, which enables the department to have a high societal impact, especially in Luxembourg. There is evidence that the department should place a higher priority on the quality of its research activities, both in academic and contract research. In addition, the visibility of the department's scientific and societal impact could be improved.

3.2 Recommendations

Based on the observations stated above and in the previous chapters, the expert team formulates the following recommendations for the DoLC (any aspects which concern LISER as well as DoLC are also reported in the institute report for LISER):

I Recommendation 1: Develop scope of research strategy

The experts recommend that the DoLC reflect on the future development of its research strategy by better defining the scope of its research areas. This will ensure a continued strengthening of the department's position in its core research areas while at the same time providing the flexibility to respond to trends and needs within the research community and society. The strategy should also include medium-term objectives related to the human resources, external funding and collaborations needed to implement the defined research strategy.

I Recommendation 2: Improve career support for staff on fixed-term contracts

The experts recommend that the DoLC improve career support for staff on fixed-term contracts. This should include transparent information about possible career paths both within and outside of the department (especially for young researchers), advice and resources enabling their career progression as well as opportunities to gain experience at

partner institutions, for example through teaching opportunities at the University of Luxembourg. Moreover, peer-to-peer support groups (e.g. for junior researchers) might be helpful. The Head of department has already taken some first steps in this direction. High-quality career support may increase the attractiveness of the DoLC to promising researchers at PhD and postdoctoral level, which in turn may enhance the quality of research output and the scientific impact of the department.

I Recommendation 3: Strengthen collaboration with external partners

The experts recommend that the DoLC take steps to further improve the quality and scientific impact of its research performance. Increasing collaboration with external partners in the scientific community would improve academic research performance.

- Firstly, the experts recommend that the DoLC strengthen its relationship with the University of Luxembourg. The department should identify untapped potential, e.g. in terms of affiliations and collaborations on projects and publications, as well as in terms of teaching opportunities for staff (e.g. for PhD students and postdoctoral researchers). The department should also ensure that its collaboration with the University of Luxembourg is structurally anchored in the department and not dependent on personal relationships.
- Secondly, the experts recommend that the DoLC increase its collaboration with international researchers working on similar research topics. Conferences, visiting programmes and sabbaticals that allow international researchers to spend time at the DoLC are all instruments that could be used to this end. Visiting programmes and sabbaticals can be particularly useful in attracting highly qualified researchers who, in turn, can improve the scientific visibility and impact of the department.

I Recommendation 4: Obtain prestigious competitive grants

The experts recommend that the DoLC should seek to obtain prestigious competitive grants, in particular from the ERC. Securing this type of funding would increase the international reputation of the department, promote international collaborations, enable high quality research and expand the department's prospects for further international funding. The experts advise that the department actively encourages and supports more applications for the most prestigious European grants. Considering the significant effort required by this type of funding procedure, the department should ensure a careful selection of applications and provide the necessary resources, both in terms of time and administrative support.

I Recommendation 5: Improve quality control of contract research

The experts recommend that the DoLC improve its quality control of the planning and implementation of contract research. On the one hand, the quality control should include clear process guidelines for acquiring and selecting contract research. The experts suggest that the DoLC adopt a more selective strategy in contract funding and ensure that the selected contract research is in line with the department's core research agenda and available human resources. On the other hand, the quality control should include guidelines for the implementation of contract research, including controlling instruments such as milestones and internal interim meetings that ensure early identification of challenges in projects. The experts recommend that the Head of department and senior staff take responsibility for overseeing major projects with public partners. Quality control should be based on information gathered about the needs and expectations of the department's partners (e.g. concerning the core areas of expertise).

I Recommendation 6: Strengthen visibility of impact

The experts recommend that the DoLC improve the visibility of its contributions to science and society by monitoring and documenting the department's scientific and societal impact. This can be achieved through measures such as the use of good examples demonstrating chains of impact, evaluations of publications and debates that have incorporated findings from DoLC research and stakeholder surveys on perceptions and use of research results. The experts recommend that the department's Societal Impact Committee take an active role in promoting the impact of the DoLC.

Appendix: Agenda of hearing

Monday, 29 August 2022			
1 15:45 – 16:45 Welcome address by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR)			MESR
16:45 – 17:00 Break			DoLC Evaluation team
2 17:00 – 18:00 Presentation by the Department of Living Conditions (DoLC)			DoLC
			Evaluation team
Time	#	Function/institution of participants	
17:00 – 18:00	1	Head of the Department	
	2	Chief Executive Officer of LISER	
	3	Joint Professor LISER/University of Luxembourg	
	4	Transversal Research Programme Leader	
	5	Research Associate	
	6	Research Scientist	
18:00 – 20:00	Discussion of self-assessment report and preparation of interviews		Evaluation team
Tuesday, 30 August 2022			
3 8:30 – 10:00 Questions and discussion on the self-assessment report			DoLC
			Evaluation team
Time	#	Function/institution of participants	
8:30 – 10:00	1	Head of the Department	
	2	Research Scientist	
	3	Joint Professor LISER/University of Luxembourg	
	4	Transversal Research Programme Leader	
	5	Office Manager	
10:00 – 10:30 Break			
4 10:30 – 12:10, 13:30 – 15:30 Individual interviews			DoLC
			Evaluation team
Time	#	Function/institution of participants	
10:30 – 11:00	1	Head of the Department	
11:05 – 11:35	2	Senior Expert	

11:40 – 12:10	3	Research Associate	
12:10 – 13:30 Lunch Break			
13:30 – 14:00	4	Research Associate	
14:05 – 14:35	5	Research Scientist	
14:40 – 15:10	6	Research Scientist	
15:15 – 15:45	7	Senior Research Analyst	
15:45 – 16:00 Break			
5 16:00 – 17:45 Group discussions with clients/business partners (group 1) and researchers (group 2)			DoLC
Time	#	Function/institution of participants	Evaluation team
16:00 – 16:45	1	Observatoire de la qualité scolaire, Ministère de l'Education nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse	
	2	Ministère de la Famille, de l'Intégration et à la Grande Région	
	3	Service de coordination de la recherche et de l'innovation pédagogiques et technologiques, Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse	
16:45 – 17:00 Break			
17:00 – 17:45	1	PhD Student	
	2	Research Associate	
	3	Research Analyst	
From 17:45	Discussion of results and report writing		Evaluation team
Wednesday, 31. August 2022			
6 8:30 – 12:30 Discussion of results and report writing			Evaluation team
7 12:30 – 13:00 Presentation of results			MESR DoLC Evaluation team