[Higher education as student self-formation]

Hello all. It's nice to see everyone coming in. Today I will make an argument for what for many will be a new approach to higher education. This is *higher education as self-formation*. It centres higher education not on government and policy, or the institution as judged by rankings and surveys, or even on the academic teacher as the responsible agent in the classroom, but on the student as the primary agent. A student-centred approach to higher education. Not a fake student centredness, as in the consumer model, a genuine student centredness. I will argue that this is the very core of higher education.

[What are the outcomes of higher education?]

The question of what higher education does is surprisingly unclear. More than 40 per cent of all young people leaving school this year will enter tertiary education in their lifetimes. Higher education is a very large social sector. Many institutions have multiple social, economic, cultural, political and international connections and roles. Definitions, expectations, evaluations and judgements about higher education are a pot-pourri of policy systems; economic, sociological and psychological paradigms; and ideologies and myths.

Yet clarification is within reach. As I see it, higher education generates two kinds of outcomes. The first, the *direct effects* of higher education, are the most central. These are first, the *education* of students; and second, the production, communication, reproduction and transmission of *knowledge* in research, scholarship and teaching. When higher education is adequately resourced it can be held fully accountable for these outcomes. Education and knowledge are also foundational to most of the other outcomes. Attempts to measure and improve higher education should be focused mainly on these direct outcomes.

What then are the other outcomes? We can call these *mediated effects*, produced in interactions between higher education and other sectors. They include the production of skilled labour power (employable 'human capital'); the allocation of opportunities and credentials across populations; the

formation of political citizens; contributions to tolerance, international relations, and so on. These outcomes are judged by scales of value external to higher education – for example graduate salaries. Higher education cannot wholly control these outcomes. For example, graduate employment is partly shaped by labour market fluctuations. The social inequality of outcomes is partly shaped by inequalities between families, and at work. We cannot accurately measure higher education's impact in these mediated domains, because of the social science problem of independence. Here the sector's impact is contaminated by the other social forces at play. For example in UK, two universities provide an identical educational experience. The graduates of one earn twice as much as the other. The high earners are from powerful families and wealthy London suburbs, and the low earners are from a Northern town hard hit by recession. What does the comparison between the universities tell us about the education received? Nothing.

What higher education *can* do is educate students as well as possible. It cannot control their ultimate destinations. The mediated social outcomes get the policy attention. This is bad because it shifts attention away from what higher education actually does, in itself, and how to improve it. The contribution of higher education is best advanced by focusing on the core functions (education and knowledge), while also enhancing the external connections.

[When 'student-centred' is not the real deal]
Today I focus on the core education function - on student development, which occurs in conjunction with the other direct function, knowledge. But here we have dead wood, two models we should send to the trash. First, the deficit model of the student as an empty vessel waiting to be filled – the student as other-formed not self-formed. It is true that factors external to the student are crucial, including knowledge and teaching, time and money, the institutional setting, and other students. However, the empty vessel model misses the crucial importance of the student's *own agency* in learning.

Second, the model of the student as economic consumer. This sidesteps

knowledge, as if it doesn't matter what students learn, and imposes a fluctuating external valuation that robs both education and student or graduate of agency. And how much power can students exercise in an education market? They must choose before they can know the options. Once they chose, there are often heavy costs in changing course. Here 'student-centredness' is just a power of market exit, scarcely usable and with little effect. It is illusory, yes. But the point is that this not student centredness where it counts, in the educational process itself.

[Basic idea of student self-formation]

As I see it students are involved in a process of self formation in the educational setting, which they determine, though under conditions they do not control. This idea of higher education as student self-formation emerged from empirical work with international students, who were moving across cultural settings and undergoing reflexive change; and also from conversations with student activists critical of the consumer ideology.

In contrast with other-formation, self-formation rests on reflexive student agency. In contrast with the consumer model this agency is focused on learning and self-development. Evolving agency is both the necessary condition and medium of student learning – only the student does the actual learning - and augmented self-forming agency of graduates is also the main outcome of higher education, one they carry throughout life. Higher education as self-formation is both an ideal to be achieved, because it is not presently maximised in existing higher education, and also a framework for understanding existing practice.

The idea of higher education as self-formation is not a big theme in economically informed policy but it has long roots in educational philosophy and pedagogy. Confucian self-cultivation retains its vitality in the Chinese civilisational zone. Euro-America has the German Bildung tradition that sees higher education as a journey to autonomy, John Dewey and the pragmatists who see higher education in parallel, as personal growth, and J.H. Newman

who focuses on the cultivation of persons in knowledge. Perhaps these older traditions underestimate learner autonomy, there is a touch of other-formation about them because of their determination to position students in social relations. I will return to this.

Of course, higher education is not the only domain where people form themselves. Anthony Giddens describes modern life as a never-ending reflexive project of the self. Political democracy, the spread of mass education and borderless markets have all brought the self-critical reflexive self to the front. Consider consumption, fashion, body management and wellness, the fascination with self-made identity, and others. What then distinguishes self-formation in higher education? As I will discuss later, these include immersion in knowledge, and access to diverse experiences, relations and ways of seeing in distinctive communities.

As I see it the essential elements of higher education as self-formation, which are integrated, are the autonomy of the learner, the will to learn, reflexive agency, and immersion in knowledge. I will now briefly expand on these elements and on intellectual resources that help us to think about them and to research them.

[Autonomy and reflexive agency]
Self-formation begins with autonomous persons with agency freedom, capable of self-directed and conscious action, who can apply their will to their own objectives. Amartya Sen sates that agency freedom is secured when people have the 'capabilities' to lead the life they value. Capabilities, he says, 'depend on the nature of the social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms' including income, education and health. Structural inequalities shape the terrain on which agency is formed and exercised. But economic, social and political structure is not an absolute barrier to human agency, in education or anywhere else. For the disadvantaged agency is the way through. Let me expand on this.

[Archer on structure, society and agency]

Margaret Archer focuses on structure and agency. She describes a continuing interplay between external elements and the agency of persons, who collectively constitute society. 'We are simultaneously free and constructed and we also have some awareness of it', she states. Archer emphasises that neither structure nor agency is 'immutable', fixed. Both structure and agency are emergent and relations between them are always open. 'The human being is neither pre-given nor socially constructed'. Structure and agency have causal powers and can affect each other. However, they are not in symmetry or balance. Rather, they are different levels of a stratified social reality. 'Agential powers', says Archer, are conditioned by but not *determined* by the socio-cultural context. 'People are not puppets of structures', she says, 'because they have their own emergent properties', their unpredictable creative powers as human beings. *Agents have autonomy*. This is so positive, so important. It means we never wholly trapped by domination. It means that building agency can expand our freedoms. It means that higher education can be transformative.

[Archer on the inner self and reflexivity]

What makes this possible is the reflexive character of agency. Each student's evolving sense of self and life pathway, the 'who I am', 'who I am becoming' and 'what I want to be', is sustained by conscious reflexive agency in the inner self, the continuing processes of critical self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-criticism and self-regulation. Reflexive agency is at the heart of intellectual formation, setting goals, planning relations and building careers.

Archer discusses the inner mental life of agents, and their reflexivity. She argues that a continuous sense of self, the autonomous bearer of expectations and responsibilities, is universal to the human condition. Our self-consciousness as persons 'emerges early in life and is the source of reflexive self-consciousness which lasts throughout life.' Archer states that our autonomy enables our 'private consciousness', the 'synthesizing self', to 'reflect upon' the social or public self (p. 292). In 'this rich inner life of reflection upon

reality', this 'inner conversation' with ourselves, we give shape to our lives (Archer, 2000, pp. 9-10).

The inner conversation is a bit like Bourdieu's habitus, an inner negotiation between structure and agency, 'the mode of articulation between people and reality' as Archer puts it. Archer emphasises that this inner self is not pre-given, it is self constructed, self-formed. 'It is continually shaped in practice, through living actively in the world'. Likewise, Lev Vygotsky identifies the formation of the infant's sense of self through its self-driven reach out into social language. Vygotsky's self is double-coded: individual agency is always socially separated *and* socially embedded. Archer makes the same point, noting also that the two codes are not the same, providing space for self-development along novel lines. Hence two different students can self-form in very varied ways within the same curriculum.

[Foucault: We ground our autonomy and free ourselves through 'the work of the self on the self]
But autonomous agency and reflexivity entail work, for example in a challenging programme of higher education. 'Self-knowledge is something that we produce internally and dialogically; it is not something that we discover 'lying inside us'", says Archer. In higher education, when the education function is whirring along in high gear, people transform themselves through the never-ending 'work of the self on the self', as Foucault put it.

Some will know Archer's work. Less will know of the late work of Michel Foucault. He returned to the Greeks and Romans to explore how to ground autonomy, so as to escape the power-knowledge panopticon, and governmentality's capture of our freedom, which he had described so brilliantly in his earlier work. The late work of Foucault, his work on 'the constitution of oneself as a subject', is the least known but arguably, the most important. A 2017 study by Stephen Ball summarises it by stating that that while Foucault shows that education is 'one of the key sites in which the processes of normalisation are enacted', education is also 'a locus of struggle

for productive processes of self-formation and freedom'. Foucault references Kant and Bildung's project of forming autonomous persons in education. Foucault's 'work of the self on the self' resembles Confucian self-cultivation, yet there are no references to Sinic culture in Foucault. A case of parallel evolution.

[Antecedents of reflexive agency in higher education]
Another source for understanding autonomous and reflexive agency is empirical psychology, including Vygotsky on the social formation of individual agency, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's theory of self-determination and Albert Bandura on agency. As with Archer on the reflexive inner conversation, the insights and techniques of empirical psychology can help in developing research programmes for investigating self-formation in higher education.

Ryan and Deci identify universal human desires for autonomy, competence and engagement. People are 'curious, vital and self-motivated', they state. 'At their best they are agentic and inspired, striving to learn; extend themselves; master new skills; and apply their talents responsibly … most people show considerable effort, agency, and commitment in their lives', which suggests 'some very positive and persisting features in human nature'. Self-determination is seen as accumulative and emergent. People align what they learn with who they are, in a continuing reflexive process. Ryan and Deci theorise unconscious tendencies, but also emphasise conscious agency, especially in the integration process.

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasises 'reflective self-consciousness' and intentionality. His idea of agency has three primary aspects: forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness. 'Self-reflective' people are 'self-examiners of their functioning'. This is continually exercised in education. Bandura emphasises that individual and collective 'agentic factors' can be modified 'to effect individual and social change' 'A major goal of formal education', he states, 'should be to equip students with the intellectual tools, self-beliefs and self-regulatory capabilities to educate themselves throughout

their lifetimes'.

[The will to learn and immersion in knowledge]

Let's turn now more specifically to student self-formation in higher education. What are the main features or potential features of self-formation in this sector?

[Features of self-formation in higher education]

First, as indicated, higher education is soaked in knowledge. As Paul Ashwin argues, unless knowledge is central we are not talking about higher education. This also foregrounds the role of teaching in what Vygotsky calls 'the zone of proximal development'. Teachers know knowledge. Students know less. Students need teachers. Second, in these large and often cosmopolitan institutions, full time students have often rich opportunities for diverse experiences and multiple ways of seeing, inside and outside the classroom. This includes peer group relations and, often but not always, a sense of belonging to a large cohort.

[The will to learn: Confucian self-cultivation]

The learner is not an empty vessel waiting to be filled, the learner is a person with a will, a *drive* to learn. Though this can be triggered extrinsically, by the discipline of parents, peer example, inspiring teaching or credentialling requirements, there is an irreducible moment for all successful learners when academic self-formation becomes an intrinsic process.

Some do it more effectively than others. Jin Li finds that the will to learn or *lizhi* is especially visible in the Chinese civilisational zone. It embodies not narrow task discipline but holistic self-formation. For Guoping Zhao and Zongyi Deng 'person-making is at the heart of the Confucian heritage of educational thinking'. 'Self-cultivation is the precondition' for developing 'the critical and creative potential of the individual and enabling him or her to fulfil social responsibilities and functions'. The Confucian self is not a finished entity. She or he always becoming, engaged in a never finished process of self-perfection.

Here self-formation through learning is a moral responsibility, a duty. Jin Li states that in the Confucian tradition 'learning is the most important thing in life, it is life's purpose'. 'The starting point for Chinese people's learning affect is establishing one's *lizhi*, commitment to learning', with the whole 'heart and mind', often by six or seven years, primarily in the home not the school. Young children learn that 'seeking knowledge requires resolve, diligence, endurance of hardship, steadfastness, concentration, and humility' (p. 14). The concept of *hao-xue-xin* (passion for learning) becomes universally understood. Li also cites Saari, who finds that Chinese children 'developed an "inner self in order to retain a private space of their own', as Archer suggests. But the autonomous Sinic individual is firmly anchored in society. The term *ren* (loosely, 'humanity') is at the heart of Sinic self-formation and *ren* exists in relationships. *Ren* combines the words for 'two' and 'human being'.

In China knowledge is primarily seen not as a source of utilitarian benefits for the self, though these are important, but as a means of self-cultivation in the journey towards perfection as a social being, and also as a means of making direct contributions to society.

[Immersion in knowledge: a fundamental feature]
Knowledge is both individualised and a collective property. The codes of each discipline permeate society, economy and culture. Far from being a retreat from 'the real world', knowledge is the medium that most directly engages students in social relations during their studies. Self-formation through immersion in knowledge is also social formation.

The role of knowledge in self-formation cannot be understood in solely generic terms. Students form themselves through the meaning they attribute to knowledge, and as Bernstein notes, the disciplines foster differing kinds of reflexive consciousness. Ashwin and colleagues investigate student learning in sociology, noting that over time students become more confident in their accounts of the world through the medium of the discipline. The researchers

not also that most students stop short of full self-transformation. Students' engagement with knowledge is not enough. 'There also needs to be an alignment between students' personal projects and the focus of disciplinary knowledge'. Student must invest.

Perhaps that investment is most complete for doctoral students. They immerse ever more deeply in knowledge and their own reflexive mentality. Growing the project intellectually means growing oneself. But all students can grow themselves through higher education.

[The social dimension]
Should higher education set out to shape the self-formation of students in terms of prescriptions for the better society? Would this be consistent with the foundational premises of agentic self-formation, especially agency freedom?

[How theorists intersecting with self-formation see the relation between individual and social]
Theorists who intersect with education as self-formation touch on social formation in varying ways. Vygotsky, Dewey and C.P. Mead model the formative interactions between individual and the social. Confucianism forms individuals explicitly in social relations from the start while for Bildung and American pragmatism, education is a tool of social reform.

One translation of the German 'Bildung' is 'self-formation'. Others are 'development' and 'inner cultivation'. Immanuel Kant sees education is the crucial instrument of progress. Kantian education forms an active autonomous subject who thinks independently without guidance from the authorities, lives in the public sphere and uses reason in a public way, in civil society. Yet like Confucianism in China Bildung was turned to nation-building and the preparation of the national elite, for example in von Humboldt's University of Berlin.

[Self-formation and social formation]

Should higher education shape the self-formation of students in terms of prescriptions for the better society? Confucianism and Bildung say 'yes'. But *which* ideal society? Who decides? When free agents are harnessed to a teleological project, it is a slippery slope.

We foster relational values in higher education, including respect for cultural diversity, socio-economic equity, and opposition to discrimination based on gender, race or ethnicity, and ableness. It is another thing to specify the social order. We cannot know or control the future. Rather, higher education should enhance the scope of students and graduates to make their lives and society as they will. Higher education cannot directly remake classes and incomes or racial hierarchies. Its great contribution lies in nurturing self-forming agents, steeped in knowledge, able to act effectively and creatively in the face of structural barriers.

[Some implications]
I now move to the concluding section

[Conditions that enhance student self-formation]
Policy and institutions should foster the scope for self-forming student agency to flourish, in all possible ways. On one hand, this means minimising constraints, such as racism and discrimination. On the other hand, it means enhancing the capacity and scope of students as proactive agents, for example, financial support that enables them to genuinely study full time. Access to teachers and learning resources is crucial. So is deep exposure to diverse perspectives, whether through mobility or access to varied groups of student peers.

[Emerging research related to self-formation]
Another implication is for educational research. Recent and current doctoral projects focus on the self-formation of mobile students in social and civic settings, and academic self-formation in classrooms. The core components of self-formation – autonomy, agency, reflexivity, the will to learn and immersion

in knowledge – suggest many possibilities for research, especially longitudinal studies. Archer's inner conversation, and student self-determination, constitute fecund zones of empirical inquiry. Much can be learned by comparing self-formation in different disciplines and in different national-cultural contexts. I'm keen to see comparison of self-formation in online and face to face programmes.

[Final thoughts]

The direct outcomes of higher education in education and research are the most important. In these domains higher education builds the capacity to generate mediated social benefits, such as value-creating economic actors and thinking, tolerant citizens. The development of students as self-forming, self-educating agents is the largest such direct outcome.

Agentic self-formation is a condition of higher education, its central process, and its most important contribution. In this framework higher education is a concentrated period of self-formation within the life-course, marked by agency freedom, conscious reflexivity and immersion in complex knowledges. This towers above the narrow utilitarian vision that is presently so pervasive, limiting what governments and publics want from higher education and reducing student horizons. Higher education as self-formation does not diminish the contributions of higher education. It expands them greatly. The CGHE webinars by Thanh Pham have shown that graduates with enhanced personal agency and the capacity to continually learn and develop themselves reflexively are much more effective at work.

Some might say it's rather obvious. Students and learning are central, yes. But I don't think it is obvious. Higher education is not always practised this way and is rarely talked about, judged or regulated this way. The student as self-forming agent is *not* at the centre of the picture. When that self-forming student moves to the centre it will be a different world.