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Student self-formation: an emerging paradigm in higher education

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ABSTRACT

In discussing the functions of education Gert Biesta distinguishes qualification, socialisation and subjectification. In subjectification higher education facilitates the evolution of students as distinctive self-determining persons. This paper foregrounds and discusses 'student self-formation', a paradigm of subjectification with fecund potentials for empirical inquiry. Self-formation emphasises reflexive agency, whereby students consciously monitor and develop themselves on an ongoing basis. The paper draws especially on Margaret Archer's discussion of reflexive agency. It argues that the core features of self-formation that are specific to higher education are engagement in disciplinary knowledge, and in activities and relations beyond the classroom that are part of student life. Student self-formation is both a norm to be achieved, with lifelong learning potentials, and a descriptor of existing practices. By its nature self-formation is never complete and its incidence is uneven among students, with some of them scarcely experiencing it. Conditions and potentials for reflexive self-formation vary on the basis of factors including the degree of immersion in higher education, the scope for agentic initiative, personal resources and support, institutional and pedagogic resources and arrangements, and existential challenges (e.g. transitions between countries and cultures) that can trigger accelerated self-reflection and transformation.

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Introduction

Neo-liberal policy frameworks that model higher education as a business in a quasi-market competition (Olssen and Peters 2005) externalise control while narrowing awareness of what the sector can do. In this performative setting, in which outcomes are defined extrinsically in terms of value in economic markets, from time to time there are deeply felt calls to refocus on activity and purpose in higher education, as a basis for reinvigorating its intrinsic missions in learning and knowledge and re-affirming educators' autonomous control of its practices.

One such periodic reinvigoration is by Gert Biesta (2009). Biesta distinguishes three 'functions' of education, 'qualification, socialisation and subjectification' (33). 'Qualification' refers to the provision of the knowledge, skills, understandings, dispositions and forms of judgement that enable students to 'do something' in an occupation, citizenship or in meeting the challenges of life. This aspect of higher education is most often referenced in policy and public discussion, for example on employability,

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credentialling and private returns to degrees. ‘Socialisation’ refers the preparation of students as ‘part of social, cultural and political “orders”’, including norms and values formed in education. This is less discussed in relation to higher education than schooling but a routine part of occupational training. Biesta partly opposes ‘subjectification’ to socialisation. Unlike socialisation, subjectification does not subordinate students to society. Subjectification concerns the ‘individuating’ effect of education, whereby students become self-determining subjects. ‘Any education worthy of its name should always contribute to processes of subjectification that allow those being educated to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting’ (40–41). Subjectification can be contrasted also with objectification, as when graduates are reified as units of economic value (Marginson 2019).

Unlike the other functions subjectification is grounded almost exclusively in the intrinsic core of higher education, the processes of teaching/learning and engagement in disciplinary knowledge, where student formation is joined to ongoing faculty scholarship and in teaching/research institutions also to faculty research. Subjectification is primarily internal to higher education institutions and little discussed in policy and public debate. Valuation is determined within education, being mediated by academic assessment and also by the learners themselves, in contrast with the extrinsic qualification function where value is partly determined by economic relations and social allocation beyond education (Marginson et al. 2023). The present paper foregrounds a specific take on the subjectification function, titled ‘student self-formation’.

The challenge of neo-liberal subjectification

The subjectification function has long permeated educational thought. It is central to Immanuel Kant (1982), J.H. Newman (1982/1852) and John Dewey (1916); and when Confucian self-cultivation (Li 2012) is included, subjectification has a pedagogical lineage going back to the Spring and Autumn period in China in 770–476 BCE. Yet agentic formation is also inescapably tied to contexts. Inner selves and their evolution vary by time and place. While proactive learner autonomy is never absent in education – only the learner can do the actual learning – the degree of independence in agency, and the role of reflexivity, the processes of conscious self-examination and self-fashioning, are variable.

Arguably, practices of independent reflexive autonomy have gained a larger resonance in contemporary societies, in which the self-forming person is the central figure. Anthony Giddens (1991) describes life as a never-ending reflexive project of the self (32). A principal reason why autonomous reflexivity is on the social agenda is the spread of higher education. Students enrol in growing numbers in higher education not only because it is a gateway to occupations and social status, but also because it offers cultural resources and techniques that enhance self-efficacy and growth (Cantwell, Marginson, and Smolentseva 2018). Hence the question is, what kind of subjectification is or should be central to higher education? Neo-liberal self-making, the student-as-consumer and economic self-investor (Tomlinson 2017), in which learning and knowledge are essentially ephemeral, or more education-centred approaches that prepare students in complex occupational roles and conscious democratic citizenship?

The neo-liberal self, *homo economicus* is an attenuated, bounded, basement-level kind of agency (how much power has a single consumer in a mass education market?) and is non-developmental in terms of self and identity. The consumer notion is indifferent to knowledge and excludes the student as a learner. Neoliberalism locates higher education as a branch of the economy whose value is computed in terms of aggregated graduate earnings (Robson 2023). It lifts that extrinsic economic relation out of all other potentials of the educational process. Here the student is firmly governed by external structural forces. Traditional religious or Confucian order is replaced by socialisation into a coercive and hierarchical economy, governed by market signals, in which proactive agency becomes translated into self-responsibility for inequality. The open possibilities of subjectification are bordered.

In the UK, where higher education is modelled as a high-fee quasi-market, the Office for Students calibrates the system using comparative data on graduate earnings and student–consumer satisfaction. The non-pecuniary effects of higher education for persons slip off the radar. Is this what students want? Learning is harder work than consumption, yet a doctoral study that surveyed student attitudes

to fee-paying in England and Scotland found that most respondents identified more strongly as proactive 'learners' than as passive 'consumers' (Nusibeh 2022). The neoliberal model has not blocked the larger possibilities of subjectification in the lived experience of students inside and outside curricula and classrooms (Tomlinson 2022). However, it has subordinated and concealed those larger possibilities, especially in the eyes of the government and of institutions qua institutions.

The assertion of higher education as self-formation responds to the closed neoliberal positioning of the student with a more open ontology in which agency is enhanced.

The response: self-formation in higher education

At any given time the potentials of subjectification expand to the extent there is scope for autonomous agency and conscious reflexive self-development. However, the conditions and incidence of self-formation should not be assumed and in practice are highly variable.

People form themselves in many domains of life including family, work, localities and communities, political parties, social media, fashion, sport, body-building and the rest. What is unique to self-formation in higher education? Previous work by Marginson (2023) identified four essential aspects of self-formation in higher education: the autonomy of the learner, reflexive agency, the will to learn, and immersion in disciplinary knowledge. To this can be added the relational experiences of students beyond the classroom, which for some students are as profoundly formative as discipline-based learning. Those elements of self-formation that are unique to higher education are the last two, the immersion in disciplinary knowledge, and experiences specific to higher education that are beyond the classroom. However, autonomy and reflexivity and the will to learn are also affected by elements specific to higher education including the disciplines, pedagogy and institutional provision.

To emphasise, the red thread running through the present paper is the figure of the student as a consciously self-forming person. A strong emphasis on reflexive agency as both the means of learning and an objective of learning changes the perspective on higher education. Self-formation in higher education has long antecedents in philosophy and pedagogy (Marginson 2023) but the notion in the present emphasises independence and reflexivity. It suggests graduates for whom the project of self-making in society is intrinsic to work and life, who make their own values, meanings and purposes (Robson 2023).

Self-formation in higher education is both an ideal to be achieved and a living practice. It has potentials for empirical inquiry and is the focus of various lines of research. It has a significant origin in research on cross-border students and has also begun to enter mainstream higher education studies (Adams and Barnett 2022, 13). The present paper is in the tradition of critical conceptual inquiry. It does not use the self-formation paradigm to conduct an empirical inquiry of its own. It sets out to more closely ground the self-formation paradigm and flesh out possible empirical domains. It is also part of a larger conversation in which other scholars also seek to define and explore the potentials of the self-formation idea in mainstream higher education studies (e.g. Lee 2021; Oldac, Yang, and Lee, *forthcoming*).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The section immediately below discusses theorisation of reflexive agency and structure/agency, primarily drawing on Margaret Archer. The next section reviews recent research on self-formation in cross-border international education and in higher education as a whole. The following section reflects on immersion in disciplinary knowledge, and self-formation in higher education beyond the classroom. The final section briefly identifies possible domains of inquiry in research on self-formation in higher education, listing factors that articulate with reflexive student agency.

Limitations

Two limitations can be noted. First, a critical review of existing literature in related areas is not attempted in this paper. For example, it does not work with the specialist literature on student

engagement. There are suggestive connections, but the vast corpus of student engagement research overlaps with consumptionist student satisfaction research; and perhaps the self-formation paradigm needs room to grow in its own right. Klemencic (*forthcoming*) suggests that self-formation might subvert the instrumental literature on student engagement. However, the reverse could be the case also, given the weight of the existing work.

Second, regrettably, the paper does not explore the implications of agentic student self-formation for the intersections between Biesta's (2009) qualification, socialisation and subjectification. For example, successive cohorts of self-forming individuals move into the world as graduates and contribute to social relations, bringing with them their agentic selves and the educational socialisation they have acquired. The relations between self-formation and social formation are very important, as the Bildung paradigm suggests (Vakeva 2012). Inquiry into the Biesta intersections is potentially fruitful but too large for the present paper.

Theoretical foundations: reflexive agency

This section presents a theorisation of reflexive agency, and the intersection between agency and social structure, which shapes the field of possibilities for learners in higher education.

The present paper draws on critical theory. Here the world is not fixed but continually becoming (Sayer 2000), pre-structured by resource configurations and prior hierarchies yet always partly open. Human lives are 'trajectories' that continually intersect with other trajectories in both planned and unplanned ways, thus constituting social relations (Massey 2005). This ontological openness has implications for relations between structure and agency (Archer 1995; 2000), enlarging the potentials of agentic self-formation in higher education.

Structure and agency

There are many theorisations of agency that help in understanding self-formation in higher education. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) studies of child development show how proactive agency is hard-wired into the infant, and how through relational speech in a language community the child establishes a social identity and capability while patterning her/his inner mentality. Children learn to work with and on their own minds in a conscious way. This process is later paralleled by self-formation in higher education, where it takes the form of induction into knowledge-relational disciplinary communities. Amartya Sen expands on agency freedom and the role of education in developing capability (Sen 1985; 1999; see also Tomlinson 2022), notions taken further by Melanie Walker (2010). In psychology Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2000) focus on people's 'inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation', including desires for autonomy, competence and engagement (68). Albert Bandura (1986) states that 'the most distinctive human characteristic is the capability for reflective self-consciousness' (21). 'A major goal of formal education should be to equip students with the intellectual tools, self-beliefs and self-regulatory capabilities to educate themselves throughout their lifetimes' (Bandura 1993, 20). Education fosters reflexive agency, which facilitates subjectification as self-formation.

Arguably, however, Margaret Archer's work is especially helpful for research into student self-formation because she theorises structure and agency as interactive while at the same time ontologically distinct. This again frees up the potentials of reflexive agency.

For Archer (1995) 'structure' includes economic, social, political, cultural and ideational elements. Structures pre-exist agents, and are not open to free abolition by agents. Yet structures do not determine agency in linear fashion. Structure and agency are 'separable' in time (70), different levels of a 'stratified social reality' (110). This is a crucial insight.

Discussion of agency is attended by a common error: the assumption that relations between structure and agency are zero sum – the more potent are the structural forces, the more the potentials of agency are reduced. This error derives from modelling agency and structure as two halves of a

fixed whole, not as ontologically heterogeneous with distinct trajectories over time. Yes, economic inequalities, cultural exclusions and political power constrain agency, and unevenly from person to person. But the constraints are not absolute.

Archer contrasts her position with Giddens, for whom structure and agency are dialectically interdependent and simultaneous, and hence are fundamentally identical (93–98; see also the critique of Bourdieu in Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 983–84). This ultimately imprisons agency in structure. In contrast, Archer argues that both agency and structure are changing, emergent. ‘People are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties’ (Archer 1995, 71). They each have distinct trajectories; and they also interact with each other. These interactions are open, fluctuating and contextual. ‘We are simultaneously free and constructed and we also have some awareness of it’ (2). Students and others ‘are capable of resisting, repudiating, suspending or circumventing structural and cultural tendencies, in unpredictable ways, because of their creative powers as human beings’ (195). What matters is how agents *respond* to pre-given structure. These responses are affected by the resources and social identities they access (10, 269; Archer 2003, 131). Agentic responses to structural factors trigger self-formation that can heighten agency. Agents can *always* change themselves. Foucault (2005) notes that the self is the one condition over which people have full control. The self is the only object that can be freely willed, ‘without having to take into consideration external determinations’ (133).

Notions of weak agency always overshadowed by structure render as ‘inevitable’ the very inequalities that narratives about inequality seek to challenge. In the face of structural inequalities, it is always the potentials of agency that offer a way through, as Clegg (2011) states. Self-formation is hard work and requires an act of will but can be accessed by all students in higher education. The task of educators is to help them to explore its potentials.

The how of reflexivity

In the Confucian tradition, ‘learning is the most important thing in life, it is life’s purpose’ (Li 2012, 14). In the process of learning, in which ‘autonomy and personal agency’ are integral (132), children are both firmly nested in social relations and also develop an inner self which is a private domain of their own (Li 2006, 483). This double-coded self enables them to work on themselves in a continuing process of self-perfection which becomes lifelong. Likewise, Archer distinguishes between the continuous sense of self with expectations and responsibilities, the universal ‘private consciousness’, and the socially active self with its changing social identity (Archer 1995, 282–3). She stresses ‘the relative autonomy, pre-existence and causal efficacy of human persons in relation to social selves’ (285). She describes the ‘inner conversation’ between social self and private self, a ‘rich inner life of reflection upon reality’, in which ‘we give shape to our lives’ (Archer 2000, 9–10).

Self-reflection is an emergent power, neither pre-given nor the gift of society, that is continually formed in daily life in the world (8). Archer (2003) studies the reflexive inner conversation empirically in successive interviews with thirty subjects. The inner conversation entails ongoing self-evaluation, ‘like a conscience’ (Archer 2003, 26, 32, 73). At the same time, reflexive agency is work. ‘Self-knowledge is something that we produce internally and dialogically; it is not something that we discover “lying inside us”’ (103). Stephen Ball (2017), commenting on the final work of Michel Foucault on reflexive personal autonomy, notes that while education is ‘one of the key sites in which the processes of normalisation are enacted’, it is also ‘a locus of struggle for productive processes of self-formation and freedom’ (3; also Archer 2000, 34). Like Archer, Foucault emphasises that reflexive self-making is not automatic and entails an often arduous ‘work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self’ (Foucault 2005, 16). In student self-formation, teaching, the curriculum, and the institution, all contribute by conditioning the process but the heavy lifting is done by students themselves.

Research on student self-formation

This section discusses research in the last decade on the self-formation of mobile cross-border students, and then moves to work positioned in mainstream higher education studies.

Self-formation in cross-border education

In 'Student self-formation in international education' Marginson (2014) summarises insights from 290 semi-structured interviews with mobile students in Australia and New Zealand, four-fifths from East, Southeast and South Asia. The paper starts from the premise that cross-border international students should be seen as 'self-responsible adults' not infantilised as 'dependent children' (11). Marginson critiques the assimilationist framing of much of the research on mobile students, grounded in notions of inherent Western superiority. In much of the literature on cross-border students, cross-border students are imagined as weak agents in deficit who, if they are to succeed, must 'adjust' not just their practices but their identities to the country of education. The adjustment paradigm is often apparent in Anglophone counselling-related studies. (Research in some other contexts, e.g. Erasmus students in Europe, is less likely to imagine cross-border students as agents in deficit). The adjustment paradigm underplays 'the active agency of international students themselves' (Marginson 2014, 9), who pursue self-defined life projects and choose a self as they see fit. These life projects include future income and career, language capability, academic knowledge and learning, the widening of social networks and, in nearly every case, personal growth.

In forming themselves the mobile students researched by Marginson (2014) exercised a high level of autonomy. Most were separated from their families. They faced continuous pressures to change so as to survive. These were not weak subjects. 'The student is typically a strong agent piloting the course of her/his life' (12). 'The idea of self-formation also focuses on inner-directedness, self-will' (16). Many discussed their conscious self-making:

The process is highly reflexive. In self-formation people learn to fashion themselves as they go, often conscious of their own changing subjectivities, working critically using feedback from themselves (and others). International students often have difficulty making themselves what they want to be. Mostly, things work out differently than they hope or expect. But they persist, reshaping their intentions as they go. They range between pushing against what they see as their own inadequacies, temporarily accepting the limitations, and thrusting forward again. Highly reflexive agents readily identify and challenge their own assumptions. Not all international students talk about their own reflexive evolution and changing identity in interview but many do. (Marginson 2014, 14)

Mobile self-forming students are inner-driven and continually 'becoming' (Tran 2016), while implicated in environments external to the self that are likewise emergent (Klemencic, *forthcoming*). By moving across borders students deliberately alter the conditions of their own self-formation. When they enter novel environments, this triggers new internal responses that change their agentic potentials and thereby alter their relations with the structural factors they encounter. Marginson (2014) concludes by pointing to the larger implications for research in higher education: 'Like all persons, higher education students are involved in a continuing process of self-formation, in which student subjects, far from being essentially other-formed, manage their own lives and continuously fashion their changing selves. Cross-border international education is an especially striking example' (18). Some if not all domestic students also alter their agentic potentials, when they move to large new social spaces in higher education and into domains of knowledge they have scarcely glimpsed before.

Studies of cross-border students

Following Marginson's (2014) research, the evolving agency and identity of mobile students has emerged as a genre. Inouye, Lee, and Oldac (2022) provide a systematic review. These papers mostly cite Marginson on self-formation, especially the critique of deficit models of mobile students who must 'adjust' to host country norms (e.g. of many Ploner and Nada 2020, 389; Lipura 2021, 255;

Sung 2022, 16; Wilczewski and Alon 2023). Nguyen and Pennycook (2018) state: 'This study provides evidence to support the concept of international education as self-formation ... where students' 'active will' or agency plays an important role' (460). Mobile student self-formation is more than an economic investment (Bamberger 2022), yet students engaged in conscious personal development also want to elevate their career opportunities and social position (Fakunle 2021, 675; Tran 2016, 12). It is not either/or.

Few papers in this literature focus on self-formation through engagement in knowledge. The emphasis is on fashioning life and self amid the cultural encounters and plurality associated with mobility, learning from difference, much of it beyond the classroom (e.g. Gu, Guo, and Lee 2019; Kudaibergenov 2023, 6–7; Li 2022; Matsunaga et al. 2020, 647; Nguyen and Robertson 2022, 823; Oldac 2022; Teichler 2022; Wang 2022a). Researchers highlight evidence of agentic reflexivity (e.g. Wang 2022b, 874; Yang 2014, 235) and 'agency for becoming' (e.g. Nguyen and Robertson 2022, 823; Tran 2016). Kudaibergenov (2023) concludes that cross-border education is 'an increasingly dynamic process of conscious making of the self' in which inner negotiation is triggered by 'contradictions of personal-versus-contextual'. Ways should be found 'to strengthen agency in international students to facilitate self-change and development' (1). Some studies refer to inequality in the capacity for self-making. Mili and Towers (2022) discuss 'non sovereign agency': some students have less autonomy than others (4).

Most of the above research consists of small-scale qualitative studies and is largely descriptive. Much of it is presented as a celebration of agency (Lee 2021). Ye and Edwards (2017) go deeper. Their work on Chinese doctoral candidates in the UK 'provides empirical support for' the claim that 'international students are able to manage their lives reflexively and take ownership of their identity formation' (873). Yu (2021) establishes that 'every international student has a unique transnational educational history and academic trajectory' (5). These are self-determining agents engaged in 'robust self-making' (6), 'leveraging their existing resources to make life-shaping career decisions' and managing 'the degree and pace of their socialisation into the host culture' (12). Xu (2018) supplies 'empirical support to the notion of self-formation' by using an autobiographical diary to identify two 'critical incidents' which triggered 'self-reflection and a self-formation paradigm' (832).

Studies of all higher education students

Changing selves, self-formation and awareness of self-formation are readily observed in studies of mobile students. But how much of this is specific to mobility? Does it suggest factors more general to student subjectification in higher education? To what extent does conscious reflexive self-formation occur among local students and in academic learning?

Mili and Towers (2022) studied 40 UK-based postgraduates. They find that all students 'actively negotiate and renegotiate their learner identities and belonging in the context of higher education environments and develop new subject positions' (1); that is, they exhibited self-formation behaviours. There was little difference between the British and other students, though non-native speakers faced larger communication challenges.

The doctoral study by Soyoung Lee (*in progress*) compares mobile and non-mobile students while researching 'academic self-formation'. She collected and analysed longitudinal ethnographic data from 14 first-year South Korean graduate students, 7 in Korean universities and 7 in the UK. Academic self-formation was common to both groups and readily discerned in interviews and observations. Each student had a unique self-formation trajectory. Student agency was mediated by student effort, reflexive self-criticism, conscious and active conformity, and mobility. 'Students' focus on effort and self-criticism implicates their internal locus of control and the self's causal power' The self was the driver of life changes and outcomes, 'both a subject and object' of the internal conversation. Lee empirically identifies specifically Korean cultural tropes in student self-formation, such as *nunchi* (loosely, reading the room), whereby Korean students develop themselves as effective social actors in hierarchical social settings.

The research on higher education as self-formation intersects with research on student agency in general (Klemencic 2015). Jääskelä et al. (2017) propose an Agency of University Students (AUS) Scale for measuring individual, relational and contextual sources of agency. Manja Klemencic (forthcoming) defines agency as ‘the quality of students’ self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment’ (11), not a possession but an evolving achievement (see also Biesta and Tedder 2007, 133). Student capabilities are conditioned by both internal factors and opportunities in the environment. Klemencic sees agency as central to both student learning and student activity beyond the classroom.

The theory of student agency seeks to explain the students’ self-formation in higher education; indeed, self-formation as a primary purpose of higher education ... It expounds on the proposition that student agency is both a condition for students’ self-formation and an outcome of it. (Klemencic, forthcoming)

Klemencic (forthcoming) argues that students’ ‘agentic possibilities and agentic orientations’ are temporally and contextually embedded. Agentic possibilities are shaped by opportunities to do and be what students value, and by rights and responsibilities that condition autonomy. Agentic orientations are students’ internal responses to their circumstances, including race and ethnicity, socio-economic background, gender, ‘cognitive abilities and intellectual dispositions’, and prior educational trajectories. When engaging with academic and social structures, students ‘convert’ these agentic orientations into capabilities comprising agency, deploying it in practical experiences (9). Students can influence their educational and institutional settings, though the structure/agency relation is not reciprocal. Klemencic shows that assumptions about the scope for agency affect what self-forming students can do, what educators believe that education can do, and also what researchers believe to be possible.

Domains specific to self-formation in higher education

The next section discusses two researchable domains in which self-formation is specific to higher education: knowledge, and the extra-curricular domain.

Engagement in knowledge

A fulsome encounter with knowledge challenges and changes the self. For Tomlinson (2022) the colonisation of the imagination by knowledge, and the formation of reflexive personal agency, are separate in student development (53–54), but arguably they often are joined together in higher education. The language of the inner self, the template for personal reflexivity, can change markedly in the course of a sustained engagement in structured knowledge. This potential is near-unique to the sector, though the actual incidence of it varies greatly.

Neo-liberal policy models knowledge in the form of individualised commodities with potential economic value: papers, projects, grants, copyrights, patents. This obscures the nature of knowledge, which consists of vast networks of collective practice in time and space. As suggested, knowledge functions like language, joining millions of people in a shifting, evolving lattice of conversation, criticism and creativity. Knowledge also confront students as pre-given social structures which have differential meanings and impacts on the basis of class, gender, sexuality, culture, nationality, racialised ethnicity, and geo-political location.

Knowledge provides bottomless techniques and resources for the work of the self on the self. Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean (2014) cite Dubet (2000) who states that students ‘form’ themselves through the meaning they attribute to knowledge (222). Later they bring those specific meanings into society as graduates. These effects of engagement in knowledge cannot be understood in solely generic terms. For Bernstein (2000) the disciplines foster differing kinds of reflexive consciousness that shape ‘who we are, who we think we can become and what we think we can do’ (McLean, Abbas, and Ashwin 2013, 265). For Maton (2013) some

knowledges are more abstract and 'epistemic'. Others foreground values, occupational roles and self-identity.

Many examples of research in this domain could be cited. For example, in their study of sociology Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean (2014) investigate what is learned and students understand the discipline. Though they focus primarily on how students are 'transformed by higher education' (231), rather than how students use higher education to transform themselves, their longitudinal work generates insights in relation to self-formation. Over the course of the interviews, the students' growing reflexivity in the discipline is apparent. They also become more complex and confident in their accounts of the world via the discipline. However, members of the cohort had a varied relation to it. Some students did not give themselves to sociological knowledge, while others did so but partly disinvested later (e.g. 229). Many stopped short of full self-transformation. 'Students' engagement with knowledge is not a sufficient condition for this transformation ... there also needs to be an alignment between students' personal projects and the focus of disciplinary knowledge' (231). Students must own their learning.

In her study of academic self-formation Lee (in progress) finds that students position themselves in a 'self-knowledge-society relationship'. 'Disciplinary reflexivity' varies according to both field of knowledge and the student's own self-formation project. Some use knowledge extrinsically to position themselves socially, or to influence society. Others absorb knowledge into the intrinsic self: knowledge becomes translated from a collective language to an individuated code for inner conversation. Some of the interviewees talk well about this.

Engagement in knowledge rests on the teacher, the indispensable gateway to disciplinary worlds. Students experience Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, the difference between what they understand unaided and what they achieve with the help of teaching (86). Perhaps higher education is most knowledge-intensive and self-transformative for doctoral students, who typically develop long deep reflexive intellectual trajectories.

Beyond the classroom

Dewey (1916) and the American pragmatists understand subjectification as personal 'growth' through inquiry and experience in natural and social relational settings, via shared language and collective reflexivity (Vakeva 2012). This insight points researchers beyond the classroom. For many but not all students, full-time institutional attendance offers open potentials in sociability, cultural activity, social and political activism, and global issues (Klemencic 2015). In literature and public life, there is no end of testimony to such personal transformations. Self-formation in higher education comes more easily to those who begin with cultural capital; yet the possibilities of self-formation can be larger for others.

At times sociability outside the classroom offer potentials for large collective experience in which prior differences in students' resources and capabilities are partly flattened out. Higher education institutions are the episodic site of large-scale social movements and/or political interventions. Pusser (2006) sees universities as 'public spheres', institutional spaces for reasoned argument, diverse criticism and contending values. He notes that in the United States modern higher education has incubated successive cultural transformations, including the civil rights movement, anti-war agitation and counter-cultural democracy in the 1960s, feminism in the 1970s, and later gay liberation, anti-racism, and pro-ecology movements. A key feature of collective activism is the advanced potential for autonomous agency. Political movements that challenge the status quo often demand from their members, whether formally or informally, reflexive self-criticism. More generally, extra-curricular student culture fosters a sense of ontological openness which broadens the scope for students' personal projects.

Most student self-formation outside class is not associated with epochal political movements. Many trajectories intersect in higher education. It is readily associated with new networks and friendships. Interviews with mobile students shows that such friendships, especially when they cross cultural boundaries, can trigger novel reflexivities associated with self-change (e.g. Montgomery 2010).

Domestic students that venture outside their comfort zone have a similar potential, though on average there is less pressure for them to do so.

Like academic self-formation, extra-curricular self-formation is readily researched using qualitative methods like ethnographic studies and shorter interviews, as well as quantitative methods developed for studying educational, psychological and social aspects of persons. Self-formation beyond the classroom lends itself to longitudinal work (Brotherhood 2020). Research can track the influence on extra-curricular self-formation of social and cultural background, gender, and disciplinary engagement; the interplay between individual and cohort development; and the role of contextual factors. It can examine the formative effects of cultural or political triggers (e.g. the global Covid-19 pandemic) on student self-formation. It is likely that the scope for self-formation outside the classroom, more than inside, varies by students' life trajectories, and social and educational conditions. This issue is addressed next.

Factors that condition self-formation in higher education

Though the institutional setting can encourage focus on personal development and imagined futures, self-formation is not inevitable in higher education. It is possible to graduate without engaging in reflexive self-development specific to higher education, inside or outside the classroom. Student subjectification in higher education is not only incomplete but unstable and can be traumatic. Much is hidden from the self-forming student: reflexive self-consciousness is always partial, new disciplinary knowledge is by its nature unknown and personal trajectories are always uncertain. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) remark on how agents can only focus on a small part of reality at any one time (979). Their goals change, and their expectations of the future endemically fail and need 'repair' (981).

One suspects that a comprehensive study of self-formation in a student population would identify much variation between individual cases and during the individual life-course, in the extent of agentic engagement, and the nature and depth of conscious reflexivity. Both internal and external factors are at play. In the longitudinal interviews in Archer (2003) the researcher monitors the reflexive inner conversation. The technique could be applied in higher education. However, this section of the paper primarily focuses on external conditions and factors. Given the constraints of the journal format, domains of inquiry are merely sketched.

Degree of immersion

The fact that students can freely change themselves does not mean that external conditions are inconsequential. Klemencic (forthcoming) emphasises that self-formation takes place under conditions created not by students but by the classroom, institution, education system and society. Unequal learning conditions differentiate the potential for student self-formation.

Bilic (2022) investigates the effects of higher education in the political community of the Slovak Republic. He interviewed 14 politicians and political staffers. He finds the potential for self-formation was determined by the degree of 'immersion in higher education'. There were two groups of interviewees. The first group testified that higher education had shaped their capabilities, understandings and outlook, often profoundly. The second group identified few formative effects. Interviewees in the first group had often been deeply engaged in academic learning, and in shared political activities and/or cultural experiences while on campus. They had more intensive and diverse relations with faculty and other students. Regardless of their field of study, as graduates they were more confident in using scientific data in policy matters. Members of the second group had often studied while working, spent less total time in higher education, and focused largely on getting the degree.

'Degree of immersion' is a crucial concept for self-formation research. It can be assessed and compared across student and graduate populations, using quantitative and qualitative methods. Factors conditioning degree of immersion can also be researched. These include whether students are

resident on campus or nearby, encouraging academic and extra-curricular exposure; commuting time, which cuts into on-campus presence; whether students work during the study; student age, enrolment status, full or part-time (part-time students lack equivalent immersion); whether students are studying online or in-place, with potentials to affect the intensity of student–faculty and student–student interactions; and field of study, some fields demand more contact hours and with less time for extra-curricular experiences. Some factors – especially whether students work during study periods – are differentiated on the basis of socio-economic capacity. This underlines the role of fee remission and maintenance support in enhancing the scope for student self-formation, especially in relational settings.

Institutions, inequalities and agency

It is not news for researchers to find that higher education is stratified, on the basis of the resources and status associated with countries, institutions and disciplines; nor that students access higher education on the basis of prior inequalities in economic, social and cultural capital; region of origin and prior educational pathway, gender, ableness and other factors. The new pathway for research is to investigate the interplay between these factors and the inner processes of reflexive agency and self-making. How to prior inequalities and incremental resources play into the propensity to conceive alternative trajectories, set goals and be proactive in the personal domain? What are the implications of the gap between the inner self and the social self, for those for whom higher education is a markedly unfamiliar world? Do these factors play out differently in various types of institution and programme?

For students whose institutions are unattractive, impoverished or unsafe, or offer attenuated teaching and learning resources, there is less scope for subjectification. Many students experience discrimination, overt racism and abuse, dramatically reducing their engagement (Zewolde 2021). Non-Anglophone students can experience the dominant knowledge as racialised epistemic violence that excludes their language, topics and sensibilities (Marginson 2022), and this cuts into their scope for academic self-formation through engagement in the disciplines. Subjectification within and beyond the classroom is also mediated by communicative competence. Kettle (2005) records that her ethnographic interview subject, a Thai student in Australia, believed that he had no personal agency at all until he developed sufficient capability in English to interact with local persons.

The question is, what can be done by institutions and faculty to augment the conditions of agentic self-formation? Case (2015) states: ‘we need to envision a university programme with a significantly enlarged space’ for the self-development of student agency (850).

Conclusion

In contrast with economic models that imagine optimum performance, subjectification in higher education can never be complete. Student self-formation is also individually uneven and socially stratified, provisional, fragmentary, disrupted, unfinished. It is experienced by many but not all students, episodically, though in principle it can be universalised. Self-formation is both a description of variable existing practices and a norm to be achieved.

Higher education as student self-formation is a telling response to the neoliberal student-as-consumer. It is more genuinely student-centred. It is more substantially empowering. For this reason, higher education as self-formation has gripped many researchers who study students in cross-border education. There, student self-formation is inevitable and obvious. The research idea has gained additional traction in studies of cross-border education because it dignifies a subaltern agency, mobile students often seen as persons in deficit. Many of the researchers who champion self-formation are former mobile students who feel it strongly.

Research on student self-formation has tremendous potential. It enables student agency and faculty–student relations to be rethought. However, mainstream higher education studies have

only episodically connected to studies of cross-border education. If research on student self-formation is to migrate from studies of international higher education to the centre of higher education studies, it needs to move beyond personal-cultural transformation in mobility, to examine student self-making in the domains where conscious reflexive agency is accessible to all students: in the engagement in knowledge, and in extra-curricular life.

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