**Student agency and social stratification**

**in European higher education**

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The Eurostudent VI report is most helpful. It is clearly written and presented, a fine compilation of what we already know about students in European higher education. The cross-comparisons are often fascinating. The report brings us closer to the social and economic structures that condition the student experience, and tells us something about student agency itself, in its commonality and diversity, within and between countries. The manner in which we interpret these data, the lessons we draw from them, are determined by our understanding of higher education and of the never closed, never finished interactions between structure and agency within it.

By custom, in gatherings of this kind, we emphasize structural factors, especially inequality in social and economic conditions, in students’ backgrounds and in the manner in which unequal backgrounds intersect with systems and institutions that favour some kinds of people over others. These structural factors reduce the fruits and impair the justice of the student experience. We are right to emphasize structural factors, because these are readily identified, and many can be changed, especially those that take shape in systems and organization inside education. But we also need to focus on agential factors, on students themselves, in the struggle to open the horizon of higher education, to enrich its many fruits for persons and to enhance justice in their distribution. Whereas a structural bias emphasizes equality, an agential bias emphasizes freedom. Agency freedom, as an end in itself and as a means to life experience and achievement in social settings—personal amid social evolution, as envisioned in Bildung—is the ultimate rationale for higher education.

As I see it higher education *is a process of self-formation* by students. Self-formation in education is not a new idea. It has roots not only in Kant and von Humboldt, and C.P. Mead, Dewey and the American pragmatists, but also in Confucian self-cultivation, which in China goes back two and a half thousand years. But self-formation is not always understood in education policy, which focuses mostly on teaching excellence, not on agency in learning. Higher education as self-formation means that students are not primarily other-determined. They are reflexive self-determining persons who use higher education to augment their selves and their potentials, and so advancing their freedoms.

The idea of self-formation as freedom contains all we might want from higher education, all forms of enhancement, intellectual, cultural, social, economic, political and so on—except perhaps for part of the autonomous practice of research and scholarship, and even there, student self-formation draws extensively on knowledge domains. Higher education as self-formation, as the development of the self and the enhancement of life possibilities, contains the human capital idea though it is much bigger. It also includes education as investment in social position. It also takes in the cognitive, the relational, the shared democratic experience, and more. Each of these is only part of it.

Higher education as self-formation rests on the irreducible fact that while learning is conditioned by external factors, by the learner’s background and resources, by teaching and learning materials, by the educational institution, by the map of opportunities and circumstances, only the learner does the actual learning. There is a kernel of agency that never disappears, even in the most didactic learning model. Higher education as self-formation is also consistent with modernity itself, which for several intersecting reasons, including universal markets, political democracy and mass education, has come to foreground identity and agency. Autonomous self-conscious agency has been called the key concept of modernity. Modern life is a never-ending ‘reflexive project of the self’, as Anthony Giddens says. Here mainstream educational psychology and economics are currently not especially modern, or democratic. Orthodox psychology models the student as an empty vessel for others to fill; as other-formed rather than self-formed. Economics finds that the value of the vessel, once filled, is shaped by market exchange and not by the student’s or graduate’s own objectives.

There are many accounts of freedom. I find Amartya Sen especially helpful. If identity is what a person understands themselves or others to be, an ‘agent’, states Sen, is ‘someone who acts and brings about change’. The achievements of the agent ‘can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well.’ ‘Responsible adults must be in charge of their own well-being’, says Sen; ‘it is for them to decide how to use their capabilities.’ The first step to self-formation in higher education is to assume students are primarily self-responsible and not dependent.

Beyond that Sen’s notion of freedom has three elements. First, the freedom of the individual from external threat, coercion, or constraint. Sen calls this ‘control freedom’ and it roughly corresponds to the idea of negative freedom in Isaiah Berlin. Second, freedom as the capacity of the individual to act, which depends on capabilities and resources, and on social arrangements that enable people to put their choices into practice. Sen calls this ‘freedom as power,’ and in later work ‘effective freedom.’ Others call it positive freedom. Third, ‘agency freedom,’ the active human will, the seat of self-directed conscious action, which guides reflexive self-formation and the self-negotiation of identity. Agency freedom moves beyond a utilitarian calculus of net economic advantage to take in virtue, including status, dignity, family, friends, making things, satisfying work, the scope to realize forms of life, and shared collective goods as well as individual goods. You can see that Sen’s three elements of freedom are interdependent. Control freedom and effective freedom are defensive and proactive moments of agency.

Sen also states that a person’s capabilities are shaped by structures, they ‘depend on the nature of the social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms.’ Inequality, poverty and discrimination stratify the agency of individuals and groups. Yet in the agency perspective, structural determination is never absolute. Structures are always partly open. Agency is not just a modernist trope, it is the way through for disadvantaged populations. Michel Foucault notes the self is the only object that one can freely will, ‘without having to take into consideration external determinations.’ He locates agency ‘in the constant interplay between strategies of power and resistance. The reflexivity of persons mediates between structure and agency. By building self, in the context of language and knowledge, higher education enhances the capacity for reflexivity. It grows the space for freedom.

All three Sen aspects of freedom are advanced by higher education, especially effective freedom, the capacity of the individual to act, and agency freedom, agency of the will. The OECD publishes data on the contribution of higher education to graduate agency. It finds that there is a close association between degree holding and having skills in information and communications technology, which are electronic forms of social agency. It finds that graduates are more likely than non-graduates to connect effectively to government, to trust people, manage money effectively, and so on.

The OECD’s *Perspectives on Global Development 2017: International migration in a shifting world* compares the cross-border mobility of people with, and without, university degrees. For those without degrees the tendency to move across borders is correlated to income. As income rises people are more likely to move. That is what common sense would expect. But among those with degrees the pattern is different. At a given income, those with degrees are more mobile than those without. In that respect higher education helps democratise mobility; though only providing you can get into higher education in the first place. In addition, among those with degrees, once a modest threshold income is reached, when income rises further there is little change in mobility. The propensity to travel is income inelastic. In helping graduates to achieve the confidence to move freely across the world, higher education weakens the limits imposed by economic determinism ion their imaginings, choices and life trajectories. Degree level education *directly* constitutes greater personal agential freedoms, without mediation by other factors*.* For graduates, rich and poor, the balance between structure and agency is shifted, in favour of agency.

The Eurostudent data cast light on student agency in a number of ways. Because in the manner of social science the report uses structural categories it is able to demonstrate in convincing fashion that the scope for building agency is socially stratified. Social structure conditions agency, as Sen remarks. The distinction between students from higher education parents, and students from parents without higher education, is the Eurostudent proxy for social inequality. For students without higher education background, the scope for building agency is more restricted. On average, they have less hours of self-formation through immersion in knowledge, in study, especially private study. Because they have less money, their parents have less money, and they are more likely to be working longer hours. They are more likely to be part-time, or located in non-university programmes where there is less scope for private study and the knowledge is not always so empowering. They are less likely to go abroad, which often triggers an accelerated form of self-formation. They are more likely to be uncertain about being in higher education, less clear in their determination and agential will. On the other hand, on average they are older, which can bring greater reflexive confidence, self-knowledge, which is fundamental to conscious self-formation.

What policy conclusions can we draw from this? First, a universal student living allowance is *the* financial strategy, the economic move that creates for students the greatest potential. It’s more useful than tuition-free education. Living support not only reduces the impact of economic disadvantage, just as free tuition. It also does much more than free tuition to build confidence, identity and a sense of belonging. It builds agency. For example, we know from the Eurostudent data that students who live independently are more likely to feel they belong in higher education. A package of (a) income contingent tuition fees, so you pay back later, when you are working full-time; and (b) universal grants sufficient for independent life; is significantly better for students than the combination of free tuition plus negligible grants-based living support, as in some European countries now. Free tuition plus student grants is a better package than either. It is more achievable in some societies than others.

Second, many non-higher education background students need specific institutional support, often in collective student settings, especially in the first year of their programmes.

Third, we need to be hard headed about the social structural factors that not only stratify access and completion, they stratify the scope for agency, self-formation and freedom.

In every society preparation for, entry into and participation in higher education is the focus of the determined efforts of families and students to succeed. States and higher education institutions together structure higher education systems, stratifying the forms of provision and their cost and value. In the interaction between on one hand structural forms and regulatory processes, and on the other hand the active agency of families—who have little scope to directly influence the forms of educational differentiation, but work the structures that face them as well as they can, in their own interest—higher education sifts and sorts the population. Its precise role in social allocation, which varies from country to country, determines the extent to which higher education renders society more equal, or reproduces pre-existing inequalities.

Families work the contest for educational and social success, at every stage. Families with financial, social, cultural or political capitals bring those capitals to bear on education and continue to do so in the transition to work and beyond, as the report notes. Each process of student competition and selection and each form of differentiation of educational provision provides an opportunity for affluent middle class families to focus energy and resources in order to advance their interest, especially at the key points where the education population is sorted, such as the passage into high status professional training. Much then depends on the detailed structures of the education system, the extent to which they provide opportunities to invest in education as a private good. Much also depends on the values that society brings to bear in its framing of schools and education – on the extent to which student and family agency is socially nested in solidarity and equal rights.

The nature of the structural forms, which enable family investment in educational advantage and so foster socially unequal outcomes, vary by country. You are familiar with the structural factors that come into play. They include:

* High value selective private education institutions
* Other hierarchies between institutions, such as between research universities and other institutions, between World-Class Universities and the rest, etc. In some nations unequal value is deliberately fostered by government-induced competition between institutions for revenues and prestige; in others hierarchies have been inherited from the past. Often it is both factors
* Fee barriers, which stratify families and students on the basis of capacity to pay and match affluent families more precisely to high demand prestigious institutions
* Fields of study distinctions. In Finland, for example, affluent families concentrate not on entry to particular universities but to high demand professional programmes

The growth of participation has had unequalising effects in many countries. The most sought-after institutions were always disproportionately occupied by the affluent middle classes. The expansion of socially elite education is normally slower than the growth of higher education places overall, so that all else being equal, the leading universities are subject to more intensive competition for entry, and over time become more elite and more middle-class-captured. Whenever there is competition for educational advantage, those with the best resources to compete tend to improve their position over time.

As the report says, widened access to higher education often brings with it an increased degree of stratification within higher education itself. But this can be modified, by policy and regulation, and by higher education institutions. To create forms of higher education with less stratification of value. As I see it, this is *the* key to an equality strategy in higher education. It is the structural issue we can do something about. We cannot change the fact that students have unequal starting points – that families have unequal financial resources, and social and cultural capital. We can compensate for financial inequality up to a point. But not for inequalities in social and cultural capital. Nor can we stop families using those capitals in their favour. Nor would most people want to stop parents from passing on these resources to their children. But we can reduce the potential for affluent families to use the internal structures of education for private advantage, by flattening the hierarchy of value between institutions, and minimising stratification of value at the schooling stage. As the report notes, stratification of schooling reduces participation by non-higher education background students. At both stages of education, school and higher education, ensuring that all institutions are good, and none has so much value that it towers over the rest, is as important as universal living support.

We can also reduce the scope for selection processes that some exploit more effectively than others, and modify universal competitions, which favour families with competitive advantages, by providing non-standard routes into higher education, as the report suggests. Without boxing off non-standard students in non-university and low demand programmes.

We will never achieve pure distributive justice within higher education, pure equality of all social groups in access and completion, in all kinds of institutions, within societies that are manifestly unequal. However, we can come closer to the ideal. The goal of a socially representative higher education system is an important measuring stick.

Providing we do not make it the only measuring stick. There are other forms of inequality, and goals other than those that implement greater equality. Wider, and more socially and politically significant, than the inequalities between higher education background and non-higher education background students within higher education, are the inequalities between graduates of higher education, and those who have never participated at all. We need to find ways of better bridging the gulf between those two groups. Populism is building a base among the less educated and fostering resentment of the educated. To close that gap requires more kinds of social inclusion than just educational inclusion.

Higher education in itself cannot make societies more equal. Too much is often expected of it in that regard. However, it can and should make itself more equal, and in that manner contribute to building more equal, respectful, inclusive and solidaristic societies.

But my main message is this. Students have agency, individually and collectively. They do not make the historical conditions in which their agency is expressed. We cannot determine the times. We can only make the best of the time that we have. Structural factors matter a lot but they are not absolute barriers. There is always scope to build agency so as to push the envelope, and from time to time break to through.

A politics of freedom has as much to offer as a politics of equality. Each is necessary to the other. Strategies need to focus on strengthening the links between them. Higher education as self-formation is both an existing practice, and an ideal to be achieved, one that can help to achieve other ideals. We will not go wrong if we place higher education as socially-nested self-formation, as the conscious self-making of student freedom, within the framework of egalitarian and solidaristic human society, at the centre of our thoughts and actions.