

The background of the slide features a silhouette of a group of graduates celebrating. They are holding up their black graduation caps and white diplomas against a light, hazy sky. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up at the graduates, creating a sense of achievement and joy.

# Researching higher education as students' academic self-formation

Soyoung Lee

DPhil Candidate, Department of Education, University of Oxford

An aerial, black and white photograph of a university campus. On the left, a large, ornate dome with a grid pattern is visible. To the right, there are several Gothic-style buildings with pointed arches and spires. The overall scene is a dense urban environment with historical architecture.

# Questions for you

---

Why are you in higher education?

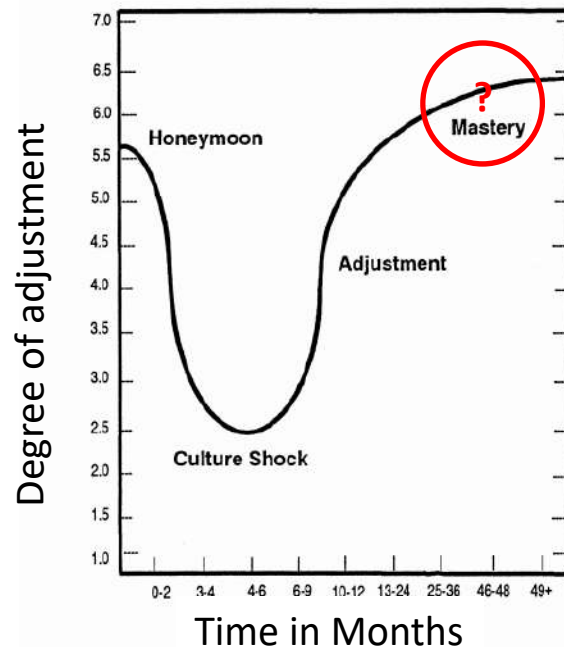
What do you want from universities?

What is higher education?

# What is higher education?

## Dominant approaches in HE research

### U-Curve Theory (Black & Mendenhall, 1991)

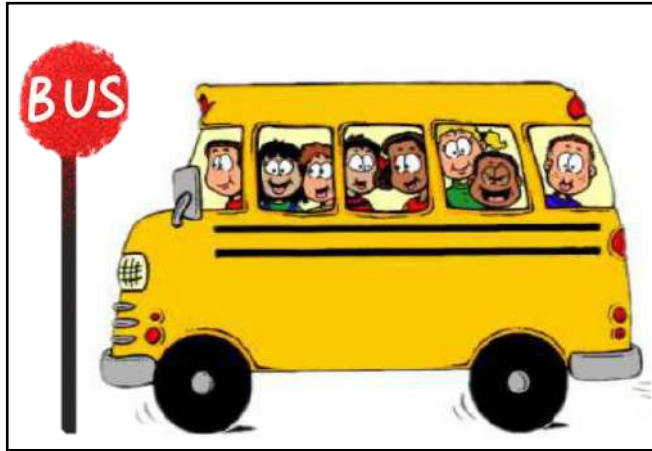


- Human capital approaches:  
Higher education enhances individual earning power
- Adaptation models:  
International students adapt to the host country

***Discuss student formation and what students do in HE without student agency***

# WANTED: Paradigm Shift

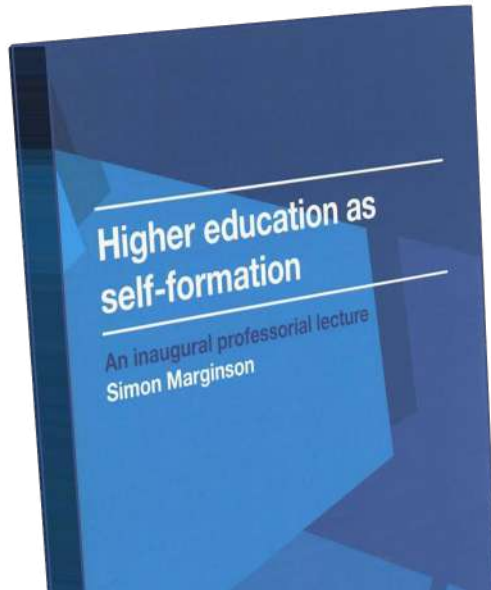
## Higher education as student self-formation



- What students do in HE is not being other-formed but self-forming
- **Reflexive agency** at the centre, **the desired self** at the end of higher education (*“Work of the self on the self”*)
- Umbrella concept that incorporates other perspectives

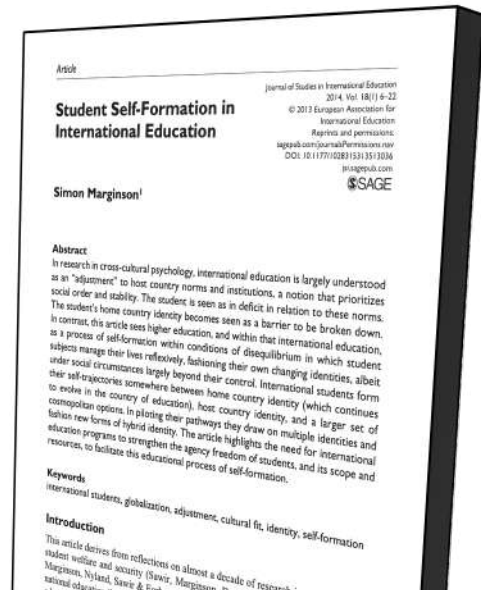
# Researching self-formation

## Theoretical and empirical research



International education as  
student self-formation  
(Marginson, 2014)

Higher education  
as self-formation  
(Marginson, 2018)



## Empirical research...

- **Regards self-formation as:** positive, dynamic, heterogeneous, and agentic student experience
- **Uses self-formation as:** assumption, rationale of a study, conceptual framework, research object, or interpretation of findings

# Researching self-formation

## Limitations in previous research

### What to research

- Self-formation confined to explaining student experience
- How is self-formation in higher education distinctive?

### Whom to research

- Exclusive focus on international student (mobility?)
- Prevalent negative discourse surrounding postgraduates

### How to research

- Too broad and normative to research?
- No agreement regarding what self-formation is

# The study

## Research question 1

What is higher education as academic self-formation?

## Research question 2

How do students engage in academic self-formation in local and international HE?

- **Sub-question 2.1** How do South Korean local students engage in academic self-formation in Korean HE?
- **Sub-question 2.2** How do South Korean international students engage in academic self-formation in British HE?
- **Sub-question 2.3** What are the differences and similarities between Korean local and international students' academic self-formation?



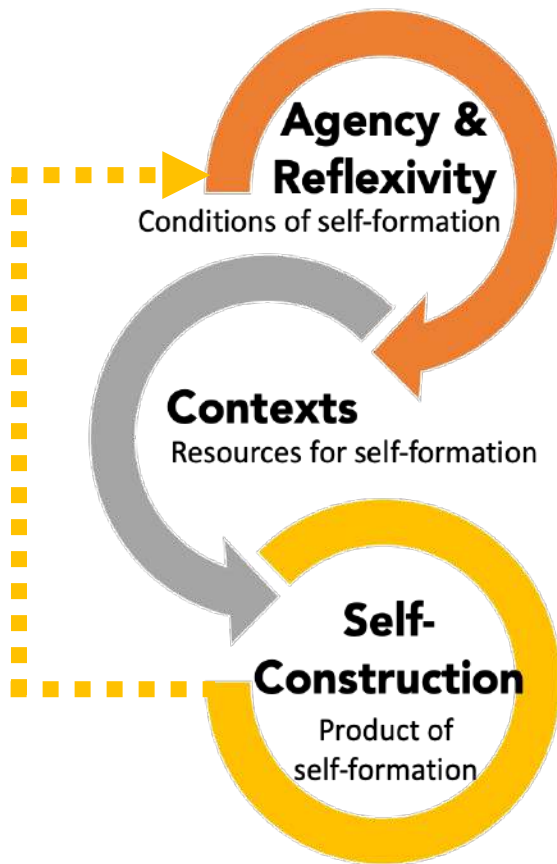
Academic aspect

Mobility

South Korean

# What is student agency?

## Theoretical framework of reflexive agency



**Reflexive agency:** a necessary condition for the self-formation process, in which students consciously pilot their own motivation, behaviour and cognition

**Contextual resources:** enablement and restraints of agency practice imposed by environmental resources; the acknowledgement of structure allows a space for the transformative power of learning in higher education

**Self-construction:** students' agentic and reflexive construction of the new self and the product of self-formation, mediated by contextual resources



# List of hypotheses

A tool to elaborate and explore it as HE  
Based on previous theoretical and empirical works



**H1. Students are strong agents**

H1.1. Students adopt personal projects

H1.2. Students reflexively interact with their contexts

H1.3. Students reflect on themselves

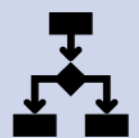


**H2. Agency is conditioned by the contextual resources**

H2.1. Intercultural interaction fosters self-formation

H2.2. Mobility fosters self-formation

H2.3. Communicative competence fosters self-formation



**H3. Students construct the transforming self**

H3.1. Students use multiplicity and hybridity as possible strategies for self-formation

H3.2. Student self-formation is ongoing and continuous

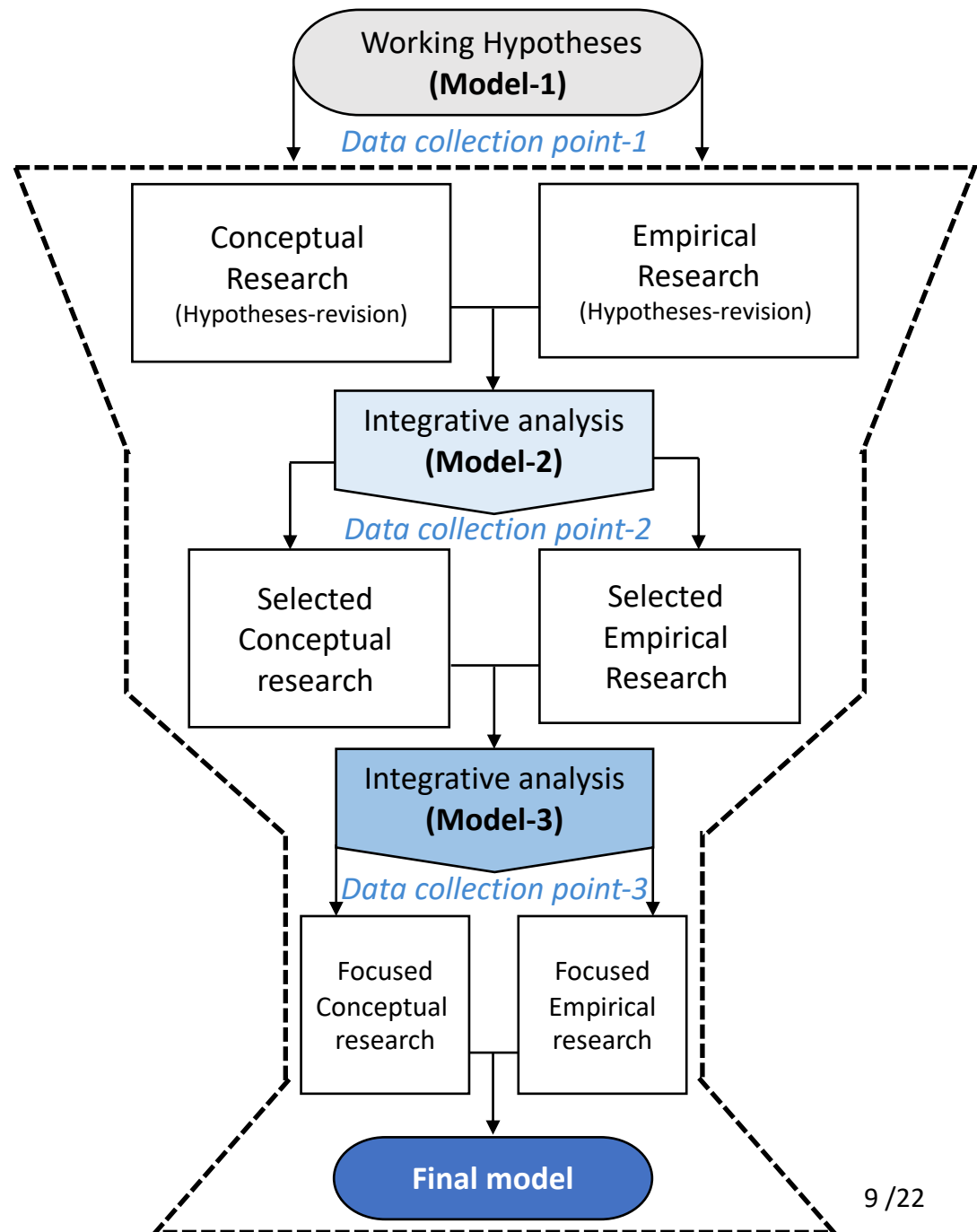
# Morphogenetic Research design

## ❖ Reflexive research process

- Conditioned by hypotheses
- Interaction between conceptual and empirical research
- Elaboration of hypotheses

## ❖ Ethnographic approach

- Longitudinal
- Emerging focus



# Conceptual Method

- Theories that share with self-formation **assumptions**
  - \_\_\_\_\_ is a universal phenomenon
  - \_\_\_\_\_ is empirically researchable
  - \_\_\_\_\_ is distinctive in higher education
- Conversation between theories with **emerging themes**

Research programme	Scholars	Elaborated by SF	Elaborating SF	Questions emerged
<b>Student development theories</b>	Chickering (1960); Perry (1960); Pascarella & Terenzini (2005)	More complexity, self-consciousness, self-regulation, social identity not as one form of development but agency	Improving capabilities and self-forming capacities throughout higher education	Student development;  Where is student agency in student development?
<b>Socio-cognitive theory</b>	Bandura (1979; 1997; 2018)	Self-efficacy as a manifestation of student agency; self-environment relationship as structure-agency relationship	Self-efficacy as empirical form of student agency; students produce challenges/mobility intentionally	<b>Agency</b> in behaviour;
<b>Self-determination theory</b>	Ryan & Deci (1980; 2000; 2017)	Needs-support environment as agency-enhancing structure	Intrinsic motivation as empirical form of agency; both intrinsic-extrinsic motivation as agency	<b>Agency</b> in motivation;  Where is academic self-formation?
<b>Student approaches to learning theories</b>	Marton & Saljo (1976); Biggs (1993; 2010); Entwistle (1997)	Deep/surface approaches to learning as more self-forming learning	How agency is practiced in learning strategies and motivations	Student learning;  What about content of learning beyond deep/surface dichotomy?
<b>Information-processing theories</b>	Sweller (2016); Paas & Sweller (1980); Kirschner (1970)	Cognitive processing strategies manifest students' self-forming power and tendency	The role of information in self-formation and agency practice on the cognitive level	But information is not academic knowledge?
<b>Knowledge in higher education</b>	Ashwin (2020); McLean (2021);	Knowledge is resource for self-formation; redefine society-	How students form themselves by knowledge	What is knowledge?

# Research programmes

## Student development theories

(e.g., Astin, 1985; Chickering, 1987; Perry, 1970)

## Socio-cognitive theory

(Bandura, 1997; 2018)

## Self-determination theory

(Ryan & Deci, 2000)

## Student approaches to learning theories

(Marton & Saljo, 1976; Biggs, 1993; Entwistle, 1992)

## Information-processing theories

(e.g., Sweller, 1980; Miyake et al., 2000)

## Knowledge in higher education research

(e.g., Ashwin, 2020; McLean, 2020; Case, 2013)

# Conceptual findings

Desirable development patterns (e.g., more complexity, self-consciousness, self-regulation, social identity)

- Self-efficacy manifests human agency
- Productive self-environment relationship
- Agency determining human behaviour

- Agency underlying human motivation
- Intrinsic motivation as inherent agency
- Extrinsic motivation as regulated agency

Deep/surface learning adopted according to students' personal projects; Student agency in learning strategies and motivations

Cognitive processing capacities enable agency practice; the enhancing role of information in self-formation

Knowledge in self-society-university relationships; how students form themselves by engaging with knowledge?

# Emerging questions

*Q. Where is student agency?*

*Q. How is agency exercised?*

*Q. What about academic aspect of self-formation?*

*Q. What about the content of learning?*

*Q. But information is not knowledge?*

*What is knowledge?*



# Empirical Method

## Participants selection

- Various disciplines, funding status, level of study (postgraduate), educational background (undergraduate in Korea), first-year students
- 7 local Korean students & 7 international Korean students
- 3 British universities & 3 Korean universities

## Data collection methods

- Termly class observation, photo elicitation and end-of-term interviews (72 hours)
- With emerging focus

## Data collection period

- Recurrent mode of digital ethnography
- UK study: October 2020 – September 2021
- KOR study: March 2021 – December 2021

# Preliminary finding 1

## Students' adoption of personal project

### Often replaced by others' projects

- Deep approaches to learning (Biggs, 1993)
- Knowledge acquisition (Miyake et al., 2000)
- Integration to universities (Astin, 1985)
- Transformation of student (Ashwin, 2021)
- Greater social justice (McLean, 2020)

### Personal projects are...

- **intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation** with varying extent of agency (Ryan & Deci, 2000)
- developing in close linkage with **disciplinary knowledge**

"Korean research fields of art are very closed, so you won't find what's prevalent in Korea in international journals. So I want to introduce Korean works to the world." (UK2-BI)

"When I was working for a company, I experienced a lot of technical limitations and lies in the engineering market... I want to solve the problems in the field by learning how to solve problems logically" (UK3-BI)

# Preliminary finding 2

## Active relationship with environment

### Development of psychology

- Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism
- Agentic self-environment relationships (Bandura, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000)

### Discrepancy reduction and production

- Avoid challenging environment
- Seek out desirable environment
- Seek out challenging environment

### Mediating role of knowledge engagement

- Knowledge transforms self-society relationship (Ashwin et al., 2014)
- Disruptive power of academic knowledge (Bernstein, 2000)

*"I already knew that there'll be difficulties before I came here, and that was actually one of the reasons why I came. I wanted to try new things, I wanted to draw out the potential inside myself " (UK3-BI)*

*"I'm giving myself hard time intentionally, digging my own grave. It gives me a sense of achievement at the end - when I see myself I can do this much work, then I can go further next time." (UK2-TI2)*

# Preliminary finding 1

## Exercising self-reflexivity in HE

### Manifestation of self-reflexivity

- Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997)
- Deep approaches to learning (Biggs, 1993)
- Epistemological development (Parry, 1970)
- Executive functions (Diamond, 2013)

### Self-reflexivity exercised for...

- Regulating the self
- Discovering the self
- Evaluating the self (Self-critics)
- Shaped by knowledge engagement

"I don't think I have done my best 100%. I always thought myself lazy and not hard-working. I have to work harder."  
(UK1-TI1)

"Everynight I regret my day. Why am I not working harder? Why can't I use the most of my time?" (UK4-TI2)

"I have never given myself 100. I'm only 5% closer to my ideal self" (UK3-TI2)

"I'm 50. But it's not about how I didn't reach 100, but more like how I achieve 50." (UK4-TI1)

"I'm 70. If I'm 100 already, it means I have no more growth." (UK6-TI3)



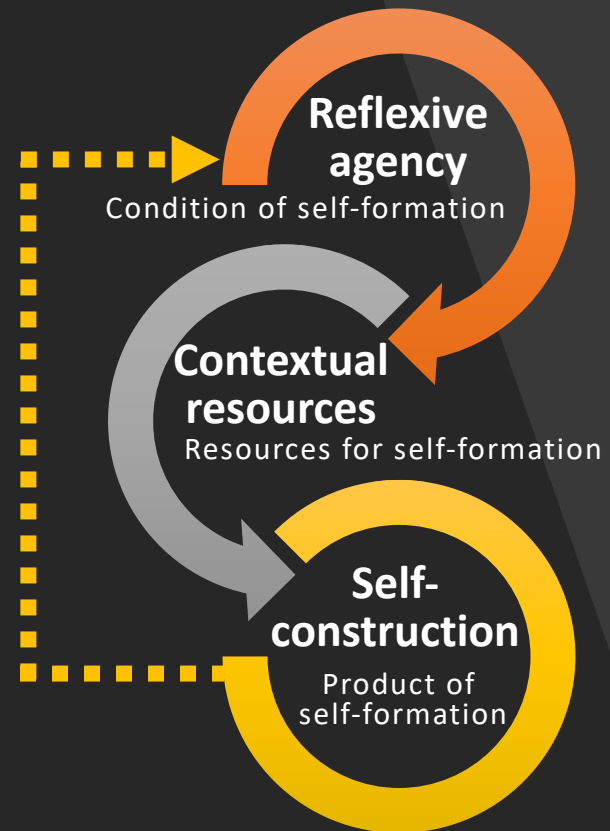
# Additional findings

## ❖ Students DO struggle ...

- As seen in a failure case
- But, where there's struggle, there's also determination
- Conformity is also agency

## ❖ Despite...

- COVID-19
- Language, social, financial risks
- They'd rather come than staying safe back home



# Conclusion

## Revised hypotheses of academic self-formation



### **H1. Students are strong agents in higher education**

H1.1. Students adopt multiple personal projects that support and are supported by knowledge engagement

H1.2. Students interact reactively and proactively with disciplinary knowledge and the social structure

H1.3. Students discover, evaluate, and regulate themselves through academic knowledge that bridges the self and society

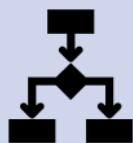


### **H2. Agency is conditioned by contextual resources**

H2.1. Intercultural interaction provides culturally hybrid knowledge that students use to construct themselves

H2.2. Mobility fosters self-reflexivity and social, economic, and academic mobility is achieved by powerful knowledge

H2.3. Communicative competences allows students to participate in transforming knowledge and themselves



### **H3. Students construct the transforming self**

H3.1. Students construct multiple/hybrid self through the transformation of knowledge and society

H3.2. Students develop new personal projects and create discrepancy in their self-formation

# Implications & future research

## Conceptual and empirical questions

This research can be...

- Supporting future research on student self-formation
- Questioning assumptions underlying HE research
- Providing a new conceptual & empirical perspective on students in higher education



# What do students do in higher education?



“그 대학이 주는 질문들을 받으려고 대학에 다시 온 거고, 그리고 그 질문들과 어떤 제 자신을 발전시킬 수 있는 틀을 마련해 준다고 생각하거든요. 그리고 학교는 틀만 주지 저를 옥죄지는 않거든요. 그 안에서 저는 자유롭게 날 수 있어요.”

“I'm here to receive questions from a university. The questions for my self-development. University is safe but free. Within the safety net, I can fly as I wish.”

# Reference

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 6-22.

Marginson, S. (2018). *Higher education as self-formation*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary educational psychology*, 25(1), 54-67.

Ashwin, P. (2014). Knowledge, curriculum and student understanding in higher education. *Higher Education*, 67(2), 123-126.

Bandura, A. (2018). Toward a psychology of human agency: Pathways and reflections. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(2), 130-136.

Case, J. M. (2013). *Researching student learning in higher education: A social realist approach*. Routledge.

Archer, M. S. (2010). Morphogenesis versus structuration: on combining structure and action 1. *The British journal of sociology*, 61, 225-252.