Self-formation in international higher education: Evidence from Turkish international students

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PhD Research Project

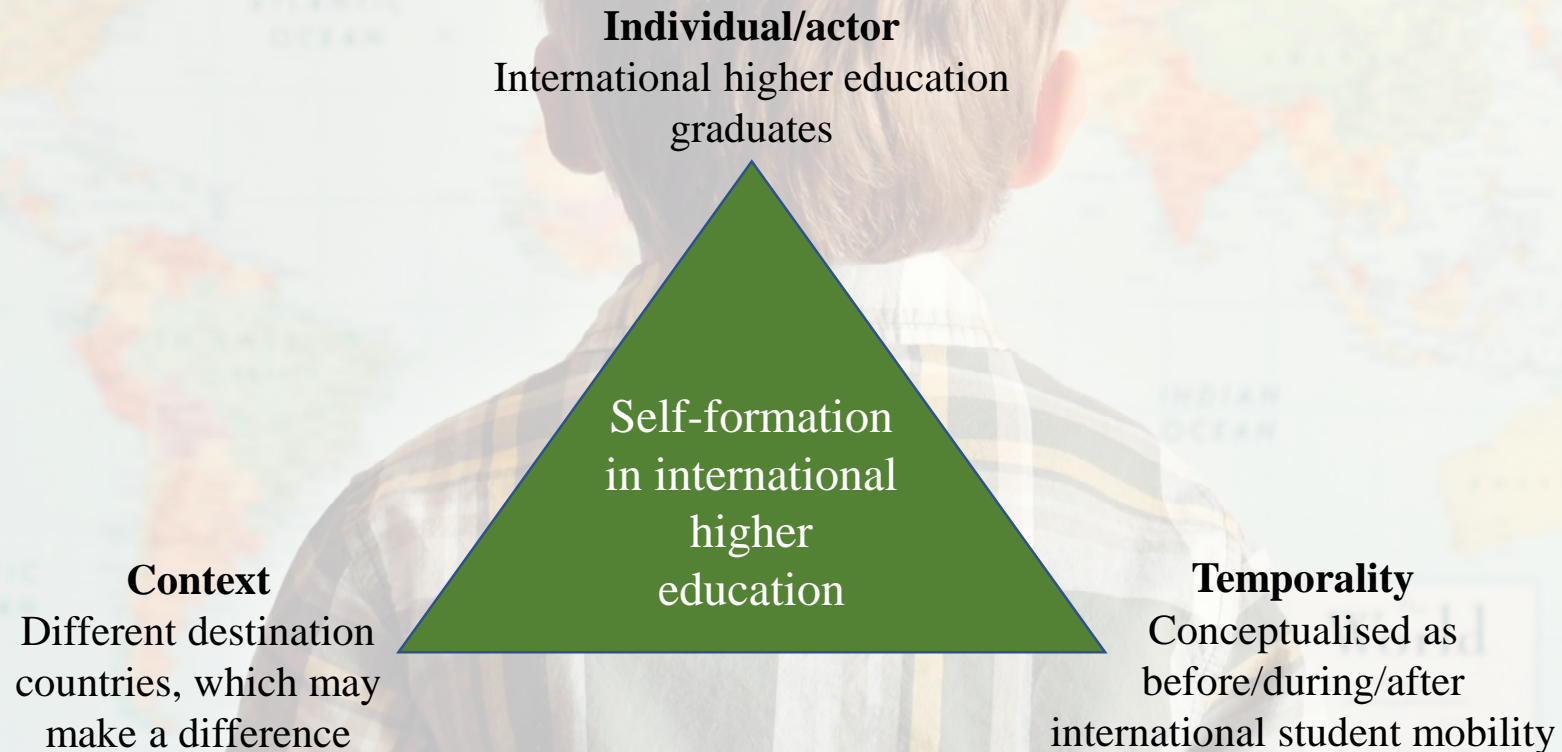CGHE Seminar Series # 205

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Introduction

- Higher education as self-formation (Marginson & Sawir, 2012; Marginson, 2014; 2018)

  - Positioned against the adjustment paradigm and the human capital approach

  - Personal agency, holistic development & reflexivity

  - Only the learner does the actual learning

- This theory is relatively recent, few papers were published on it. This doctoral work is one of the early studies to empirically investigate it.

Theoretical framework -
Ecological approach to understanding self-formation in international higher education (building on Biesta & Tedder, 2007)

Individual/actor
International higher education graduates

Self-formation in international higher education

Context
Different destination countries, which may make a difference

Temporality
Conceptualised as before/during/after international student mobility

Purpose – Research Question

- How do Turkish young adults who completed their degrees abroad explain their self-formation (SF) in international higher education?

Methods 1/2

- Qualitative study, with biographical dimension (Roberts,2002; Goodson and Sikes, 2001)

- Data collection: semi-structured interviews and life timeline forms

- Data analysis: Thematic analysis (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014), both inductive and deductive approaches
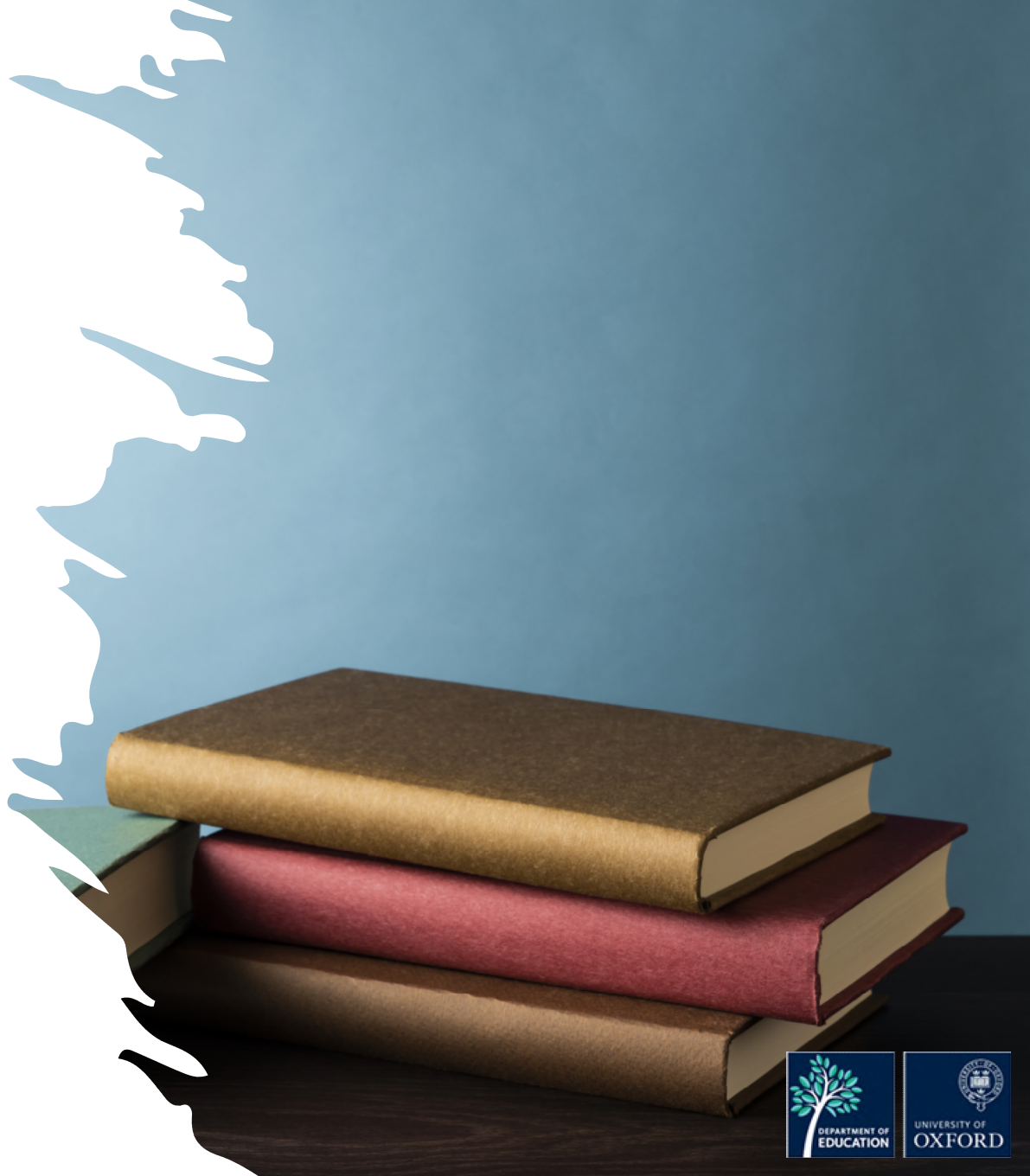
Methods 2/2
International comparative fieldwork
supported by BAICE fieldwork grant
(award # 20181101)
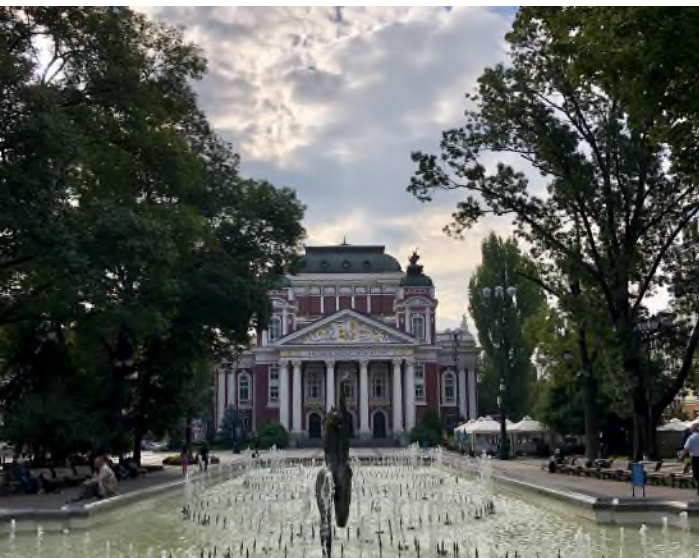
Findings - outline

I will share the findings under three main headings:

1. The educational domain of SF

2. The social domain of SF

3. The civic domain of SF

The educational domain-
International Higher Education as a Milestone in One's Life Trajectory

"There are two or three turning points in one's life. . . . The university, to be more specific, the department you chose, the course you've taken at your department, the education you've received, . . . and all the knowledge you've acquired, that's what drives your real life. I mean, going to university is your first step into real life. . . . because university is actually the middle of one's life [not literary, but to express its importance]."

Atakan, Azerbaijan

"Higher education is a much freer environment than any other environment before it. You can't even decide for yourself how to dress in high school. It's the first place you start to differentiate. From the choice of profession to the choice of social activity, the cafes you go to . . . people don't usually make decisions like these in high school. All these decisions lead people's lives toward different interactions and environments."

Yasar, UK

The educational domain-
International Higher Education as a Milestone in One's Life Trajectory

The educational domain-
The Guiding Role of the University for Self-Forming Students

"Nowadays, . . . university departments no longer train you to perform a predetermined professional line of work. Nowadays, they educate you so that you find your own path and try things. With such events and networking opportunities, etc., the university lets you work on whatever interests you. It helps you find your direction."
Ebrar, Germany

The educational domain-Contextual Differences in the Approach to Learning

"Germany taught me how to learn. . . . They never teach anything. They give you the arguments. This and this are the sources, play with them. They guide you. In the advanced stages, they won't even guide you. Figure it out yourself, just like that."
Fatih, Germany

"I noticed this distinction after going abroad for my masters. What we call education and teaching in Turkey is—it'll be an interesting wording but—spoon-feeding students with information. But after I went to Germany, I realised that university is not a place that teaches information to people but a place that teaches how to evaluate/utilise information."
Alpaslan, Germany

The educational domain- Contextual Differences in the Approach to Learning

"University educates everyone, everyone goes through it and begins to work afterwards. It would be beneficial on behalf of the country, the nation, or the world overall if a good or knowledgeable individual were educated there. . . . This applies to university teachers or any other [teacher]; if they want to educate a good individual, then they can. . . . I mean the educator needs to be good so that a good individual can be raised."
Sarp, Azerbaijan.

"They even checked the notes you kept during classes. Were you taking notes or not? . . . We were getting points from that, too. Also, there was no concept of being absent. If you were not present at a total of 50 classes, you would automatically be kicked out."
Melis, Azerbaijan

The social domain-
Bridging Cultures and Worldviews

"No matter how open-minded you say you are, you continue some parts of your life by habit. And these are part of the cultural habits of the society you live in. But when you build friendships with members of a foreign community, you have to take yourself out of the habits of your own society."
Alpaslan, Germany

"You see, for example, how a Chinese person works, how he lives . . . It is different when you see it by experiencing it first-hand and different when you hear about it from the news and your surroundings"
Mustafa, Germany

The social domain-
Becoming a Better Intercultural Communicator

"The communication skills of someone who has not been to abroad . . . with foreign people would be very different from that of someone who has lived with them [foreigners] for a while. After all, you learn to be tolerant. The religion of the other person is important, what they eat and drink." *Mustafa, Germany*

"You meet foreign people. You talk to them. Of course, my English is not perfect, but talking to foreigners had a great effect on my self-confidence. I mean, I am not afraid about saying something wrong because their native language is not English either. I make a mistake. They make it too. . . . This is how my language skills have developed.*"*
Aykut, Bulgaria

The social domain-
Self-Formation through
Extracurricular Activities

"I joined the art of carpet weaving and painting. I did not have a network that did these in Turkey. Here I got to meet people who are good at what they do. . . . They invite us, and we go join them."
Burak, Azerbaijan

"I am a person who values art . . . I understood this better when I got into it. I used to find it repulsive, like what's the point of painting or sculpting? But when I saw that the artist worked on the knots one by one and even used a magnifying lens for some parts, I said to myself that this is very delicate and sophisticated work."
Burak, Azerbaijan

The civic domain-Apprenticeship in New Worldviews

"Capitalism is recent [in Azerbaijan]. This is a culture that I have never seen before. That was the thing that changed me. You grow up with capitalism here [Turkey], and you see socialism there. We have always been told that socialism is bad. . . . We characterise socialism as an unwanted regime that people are forcefully held part of. Then you go there and hear people say they were very happy back then. They even say they wish the system hadn't fallen apart."

Rana, Azerbaijan

The civic domain-
Apprenticeship in New Worldviews

"When we first went there [Azerbaijan], they were recently attempting to transition to capitalism. It was incredible to see that transition. . . . I saw that communism is not something like the communists in Turkey dream of."
Melis, Azerbaijan

The civic domain-
Apprenticeship in New Worldviews

"I always had in my mind that capitalism does not work. But I couldn't call myself a socialist or anti-capitalist. Because although I could think and question that capitalism does not work, I could never prove it to myself. After I came here [Germany], I was able to develop these thoughts more easily."
Ahmet, Germany

"The people around me helped me with this, not by teaching but they gave me food for thought. They would tell me a book name, and I would read it. My world would change afterwards. . . . Or I would say something that would challenge them. Talking about things opposed to my worldview pushed me to do further research. I formed a more critical perspective. I think I can look at the world in a more realistic and better way now. I learned that accessing alternative information can be easy."

The civic domain-
Apprenticeship in New Worldviews

"My coming to the UK and learning English had a profound impact on my developing an understanding of the world. I watched objective documentaries. I listened impartially, objectively, because there is some truth to be taken from all sides. I developed a certain perception, a certain understanding."

Omer, UK

The civic domain-
Apprenticeship in New Worldviews

"There is a more global Aysel now, a more world-citizen Aysel. I was never a highly nationalist person. I was not like, "I am a Turk. I was born here, and I am from here." But now it is more like these borders seem meaningless to me. I mean, I was born here but so what? I could have been born a thousand kilometres further away or in a different place. This does not say much about me."
Aysel, UK

"You evaluate yourself differently depending on how closed you are to the world. So, when you look at Turkey, for example [you see an] unnecessary confidence, unnecessary nationalism. Or let me tell you in the simplest terms, I too thought that the best food in the world was in Turkey, but as I got to know the world I was like, 'hold on a sec!'"
Mustafa, Germany

Concluding remarks

- International higher education is not just about what happens in the classes – social and civic domains of self-formation were evident in the quotations.

- Agency – they are the captains of their ships.

- Context is important, it conditions agency.

- Temporality – students build on their previous selves and reflexivity plays a role in this

- The findings do not intend to negate the structural inequalities among universities or country contexts but to underline the role of agency.

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Thank you!
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