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# Researching higher education as students' academic self-formation

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# Researching higher education as students' academic self-formation

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## **Abstract**

Higher education as student self-formation is an emerging concept that foregrounds students' reflexive agency in determining what higher education is. Although self-formation has drawn considerable attention and agreement within the field, its embryonic research programme needs further conceptual development and empirical exploration. This working paper draws on an ongoing research project that aims to elaborate the self-formation framework, centring on two research questions: (a) what is higher education as academic self-formation? (b) How do students engage in academic self-formation in local and international higher education? This paper introduces a possible way of researching self-formation and presents preliminary findings about students' exercise of reflexive agency in the process of their academic self-formation. By following Margaret Archer's theory of human agency, a morphogenetic research design was devised. Empirical data from South Korean students and conceptual data from psychology are integrated to examine a series of hypotheses of students' reflexive agency; adoption of personal projects, active relationship with the environment/structure, and self-reflexivity. The study offers methodological and conceptual contributions to the research of self-formation, and the preliminary findings provide novel insights into higher education as academic self-formation.

**Keywords:** self-formation, student agency, higher education, international students, South Korea

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# Higher education as student self-formation

## Introduction

What is higher education? Two influential responses to the question are shaped by human capital theory and deficit models. Narratives rooted in human capital approaches see higher education as an instrument to enhance individual earning power. From this perspective, students pursue university education for greater social, economic, and cultural capitals, which explains families' and individual investment in international education that opens doors to a greater number of prestigious, world-class universities. With growing international student mobility, the way in which mobile students' experiences in international higher education are interpreted provides another important perspective about higher education. A widespread assumption underlying existing theories of international students (e.g., adaptation theories) is that these students are deficient, and so to be successful they need to be filled with the 'appropriate' features such as culture, language, and academic skills by university. Both human capital theory and deficit models imply that higher education is what transforms students in certain desirable ways.

The transformational power of higher education is premised on the assumption that student formation is led by institutions or teachers, not by the student self. However, students in higher education are gradually being recognised as strong agents who can actively navigate their journeys into and through university. Such a paradigm shift was instigated by a recent idea that pictures higher education as student self-formation (Marginson, 2014, 2018a). As an agential understanding of higher education, the self-formation concept initially emerged drawing on a large-scale research project on international students' experience in Australian higher education (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). Then the concept was elaborated by summative theorisation, drawing on cross-cultural research, educational philosophies in East and West, and sociological as well as psychological ideas (Marginson, 2014; 2018). Unlike human capital approaches, higher education as self-formation regards students as driven not only by external rewards but also by a range of students' personal projects. Various capitals that students can acquire through higher education are not the ultimate goals but resources for their self-formation. Unlike

adaptation theories, the self-formation framework argues that students are neither portrayed as deficient, nor do they simply assimilate to the given contexts. Self-forming individuals have strong capabilities to reflexively fashion themselves as they want, possibly by pursuing multiplicity and hybridity of culture within the self. The central argument of self-formation is that students' reflexive agency is at the heart of higher education and their desired self at the end.

Attracting a great deal of agreement for its proposition about the need to focus on student agency in higher education research, the summative theorisation of self-formation has been followed by empirical investigations. These studies have frequently used the self-formation concept as a research object under exploration or as a conceptual framework that guides data collection and analysis processes and interpretation of findings.

### **Empirical research on self-formation**

Previous research stimulated by *Student Self-formation in International Education* (Marginson, 2014) centres around four research themes. While some studies aimed to provide empirical evidence to the self-formation paradigm by focusing on student experience (Theme 1: *student experience*) (e.g., Lee, Kim, & Wu, 2019), others tried to make meaningful implications to higher education policies and practices by adopting the concept (Theme 2: *higher education policy*) (e.g., Lomer, 2018). There have also been discussions of the values, meaning of higher education, with self-formation as one of the possible lenses, which often entailed re-examining the philosophical groundings of higher education research (Theme 3: *contributions of higher education*) (e.g., Marginson, 2018b). A few authors referred to self-formation as one of the new trends in higher education literature in general (Theme 4: *new research trend*) (e.g., Bedenlier, Kondakci, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). Among these four themes, the majority of the literature (25 out of 44 papers) focused on the first theme, self-formation as student experience.

Two limitations emerged when the self-formation research on student experience was reviewed. First, the empirical studies were almost exclusively conducted with international student samples (e.g., Nguyen & Pennycook, 2018; Xu, 2018; Yang,

2014; Ye & Edwards, 2017). This tendency is rooted from the initial paper (Marginson, 2014) that highlighted international education as self-formation, with mobile students' transition to a novel environment as an important accelerator for the self-formation process. Nevertheless, local higher education should be included into the self-formation discourse because domestic students would also face academic, sociocultural, and geographical mobility and engage in self-formation. The claim about the impact of mobility can also be more effectively supported by looking into both international and local students' experiences.

The second limitation of earlier studies is concerning the conceptual breadth of self-formation. Researchers have strengthened the argument that students are strong agents by interpreting various aspects of college student experience and development as self-formation. However, they have shown a lack of consensus on what self-formation is and what is not; or how to conceptualise it. For instance, empirical research has often equated self-formation with any positive (Wu, 2015), personal (Yang, 2014), transformational (Boni & Calabuig, 2017), multi-cultural (C.L. Xu, 2015), or agentic (Kudo, Volet & Whitsed, 2018; Lee et al., 2019) student experiences in higher education. This shows how the comprehensive nature of self-formation can cause it to be used almost as a buzzword. When a concept is so all-encompassing, building its research programme can be challenging. Thus, conceptual development and empirical research of self-formation should go abreast of each other.

These two limitations can be tackled by focusing on a specific aspect of self-formation and remitting the breath of their empirical investigation. While humans can form themselves not only in university, but also in various life scenes and social settings, student self-formation through immersive engagement with disciplinary knowledge is unique and almost exclusive in higher education. Empirical research on academic self-formation that is distinctive to college students, therefore, can provide insights about the meaning of higher education. Studying the academic aspect of self-formation can also address the gap in researching local higher education as self-formation, for academic life is not confined to international students only.



Self-formation can explain much more than individual experiences in university. It can draw a novel answer about what higher education is from what students do and how student formation occurs. Human formation has been extensively researched by a range of psychological theories with well-established, long haul of research programmes. In particular, psychology of human development as an agentic process would be highly informative in articulating the self-formation concept. What the conceptual elaboration of self-formation offers is the possibility of shedding agential perspectives from psychology on the sociological discussion of higher education.

### **Psychology and higher education as self-formation**

The advent of the self-formation idea in higher education research is comparable to the emergence of agentic explanations of human formation in psychology.

Psychological discipline can be traditionally characterised by micro- and macro-analytic approaches to human functioning (Bandura, 2001). While micro-level viewpoints focused on the inner workings of the mind in the basic mechanisms that navigate human functioning, macro-theorising investigates external factors in human development.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, after John Watson (1913) introduced behaviourism, radical behaviourists dominated the field, advocating that environment alone shapes people's behaviours. It is famously stated by Skinner ([1971] 2002) that: "a person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him" (p. 211). Even after this unconscious input-output model was replaced by an input-throughput-output model, it was still premised on a linear computational system in which information is processed through a mechanism that "cranks out solutions according to preordained rules" (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). For instance, human behaviour was often expressed by an equation,  $B=f(P, E)$ , where B, P and E stand for behaviour, personal factors, and environmental effects, respectively; it was believed that human formation is determined by the combination of inner forces (e.g., needs, drives, impulses) and external stimulus (e.g., rewards, punishments) on an unconscious level. From this view that hardly admits human agency or reflexivity, higher education is merely where students are involved in stimulus-response mechanisms. This is reminiscent of human capital approaches that see higher education as a provider of certain

stimulus (e.g., capitals) that draw certain responses from students (e.g., attending university).

Researchers in the 21st century moved toward a more detailed understanding of the internal psychological processes or cognitive capacities as a mediator between various determinants and human behaviour. Their major focus was “people’s goals, purposes, and meanings, pinpointing the cognitive, emotional, and biological mechanisms underpinning complex human behaviours” (Ryan & Deci, 2019, p. 4). Criticising the traditional psychologists for undermining human agency, Albert Bandura called for a paradigm shift from regarding environment as “a fixed property that inevitably impinges upon individuals and to which their behaviour eventually adapts” (Bandura, 1977, p. 40) to that as what people act on “by creating it, preserving it, transforming it, and even destroying it” (Bandura, 2001, p. 104).

Similarly, Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) challenged the underlying assumption of behaviourism by emphasising the innate growth tendency behind human motivation as a manifestation of active human agency. This gradual emergence of more agentic theories in psychology is similar to the paradigm shift in higher education research, which is led by the self-formation approach. While self-formation needs further empirical examination as its research programme is in the embryonic stage, psychology of human agency has developed through a decades-long history of deductive and inductive investigation. Therefore, psychological theories of human agency have the potential to offer insight into student self-formation. If who students are and what they do in higher education can be agentially reconceptualised by using psychological theories, then the dominant narratives around what higher education is could also be revised as self-formation.

Psychology of human agency is one of the conceptual resources for my ongoing research project on academic self-formation in higher education. This working paper provides a partial picture of the study. The theoretical and methodological approaches of the study, as well as its preliminary findings, are presented in this paper, with the aim of demonstrating a possible way of researching student self-formation in higher education. A brief description of the research project is presented

below, followed by an introduction of the theoretical framework I developed to conceptualise reflexive agency in self-formation. Subsequently, I discuss the methodological decisions that enable effective empirical and theoretical investigation of self-formation. By providing a summary of the preliminary findings of the study, this paper also attempts to show how both empirical and conceptual findings about self-formation can be integrated.

### **The study**

To conceptualise self-formation as a way of defining higher education, the study examines the distinctive characteristics of student self-formation in university. This will be enabled by focusing on the academic aspect of the phenomenon that is highly related to students' engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Having a specific focus on academic self-formation would also help address the challenges of empirical research in distinguishing what is self-formation and what is not. Also, to extend the self-formation discourse to local higher education, which has been excluded from the literature, the study involves both local and international students as research participants. Comparison between these two student groups will allow testing the expectation about international mobility as a critical resource for self-formation. The project addresses two central research questions: (1) What is academic self-formation? (2) How do students in local and international higher education engage in academic self-formation?

South Koreans as local and international students are selected as participants of the study. South Korea has the highest tertiary enrolment rate in the world (World Bank, 2021), which indicates a high value placed on higher education in the country. This makes Korea an informative research context to study autonomous and active engagement with academic self-formation through learning in higher education. British higher education will be the other research context for the comparison between local and mobile students. This choice of the UK is expected to contribute to addressing the relatively little collaboration between Korean and British researchers (Marginson, 2018b), despite the popularity of the UK as a study abroad destination among mobile students from South Korea (UNESCO, 2021).

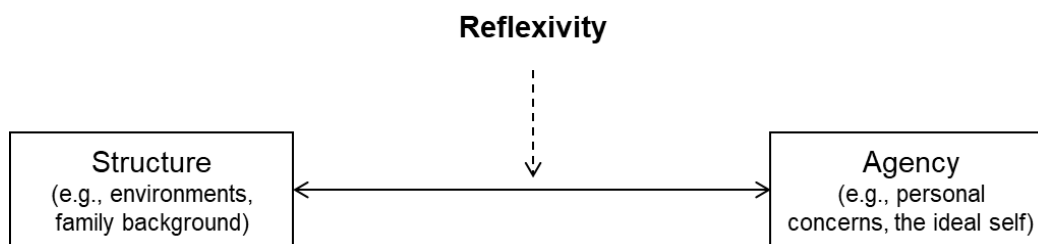
## **Theoretical framework of student agency**

As agency is a necessary concept in higher education as self-formation, research on student self-formation should firstly define what student agency is. While agency is a broad notion, self-formation proposes 'reflexivity' as a specific feature of agency highlighted in higher education (Marginson, 2014).

One way to conceptualise reflexive agency is to adopt the perspective of major social theories surrounding the structure-agency debate. These include Archer's (2010) morphogenesis theory and Giddens' (1991) structuration theory. Archer (2010) foregrounds agents' conscious reflexivity as a pivotal factor between agency and structure; it is an irreducible enabler and constrainer of the autonomous and separate causal power of both structure and agency. Meanwhile, Giddens (1991) includes the unconsciousness of agency in addition to its reflexivity. In other words, while Archer interprets the structure-agency relation as independent (divided into two: "dualism"), Giddens regards it as interdependent with structure internalised by agents (combining two: "duality") (Akram, 2012; King, 2010). It is notable that dominant narratives in higher education research are closer to the structuration theory. For instance, adaptation models generally perceived successful learning trajectories in international higher education as a process of accepting the host country's contexts, or structure. In contrast, the self-formation perspective shares a significant focus with the morphogenesis theory: the reflexive agency.

Archer's (1995, 2000) model is useful to expound the function of reflexive agency in the self-formation process. The morphogenesis framework presumes that agents can consciously make sense of themselves. When agents face social orders, they reflexively deliberate their course of action by taking these factors into consideration. Between structure and agency is reflexivity, through which students negotiate, prioritise, and develop individual projects, or courses of action intended to realise the ideal self. As illustrated in Figure 1, for Archer (2008), reflexivity is a two-way process between the personal projects and situations, which is both "subjective evaluations of their situations in the light of their personal concerns" and "their (re-) evaluation of their projects in the light of their situations" (p. 1). Although some

researchers criticise reflexivity in Archer’s theory for advocating *hyper-deliberation* without considering unconsciousness in agency practice (Akram, 2012; Fleetwood, 2008; King, 2010), its emphasis on consciousness is suitable to study students’ intentional engagement with their academic self-formation.

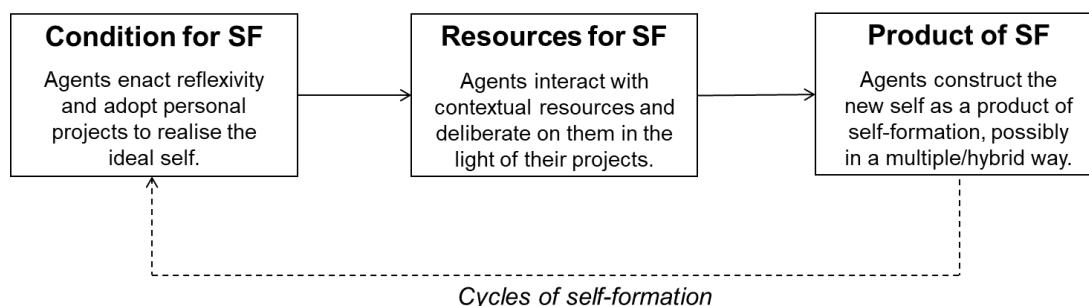


**Figure 1: Structure, agency and reflexivity for Archer (1995; 2000)**

The function of the two-way reflexivity is effectively demonstrated by the full morphogenetic model. The morphogenetic cycle of human agency, in particular, is insightful to conceive of reflexive agency in the process of self-formation (Case, 2013). The model consists of three phases: (1) agents born into a set of conditions (*conditioning*); (2) agents’ active interaction with new situations (*interaction*); and (3) transformation of the agents and structure (*elaboration*). This process is recursive with the elaborated agency and structure that condition the further morphogenetic cycles. Throughout the cycles, the agents enact self-reflexivity to make sense of themselves by considering their given contexts and personal projects to realise the preferred self. In the interaction phase, the agents reflexively deliberate the environmental properties and resources for achieving their personal projects. Consequently, the subjects reach the elaboration stage that is equivalent to the construction of the multiple and hybrid self, the product of self-formation.

Marginson’s (2014, 2018) theorisation of self-formation can be complemented by Archer’s (2010) model of human agency. First, it clarifies what agents do and how reflexivity functions in the self-formation process. Second, a processual construct of the condition, resource, and product of self-formation emerges from the morphogenetic cycle. Based on these two points, a conceptual framework of

academic self-formation was established (Figure 2) to guide the data collection and analysis process of the study.



**Figure 2: The conceptual framework of academic self-formation**

The self-forming subjects exhibit strong agency and interact with contextual resources in the process of constructing the desired self. This process is permeated by the subjects' reflexive deliberation on the self and contexts throughout the self-formation cycle. First, students practice reflexive agency to pilot their own motivation, behaviours, and cognitive processes, which is a necessary condition for self-formation. Second, student agency is enabled and restrained by contextual resources, of which process is also consciously reflected by students. By acknowledging the impact of environmental resources, self-formation opens a space for higher education to play its transformative influences on the students. Third, throughout this exercise of reflexivity between agency and structure, students engage in the construction of the new self. Among these phases, the first part of exercising reflexive agency will be the focus of this working paper.

## Methodology

As a way of researching student self-formation, I devised an integrated research design that is inspired by Archer's (2010) Morphogenetic model. This section will introduce the methodological approach that I used to address the two research questions: (1) what is higher education as academic self-formation? (2) How do South Korean students engage in academic self-formation in local and international higher education? It is important to note that the first question is regarding the concept of self-formation and requires theoretical/conceptual discussions, whereas

the second question demands of empirical investigations on students' real experiences.

### **Morphogenetic research design**

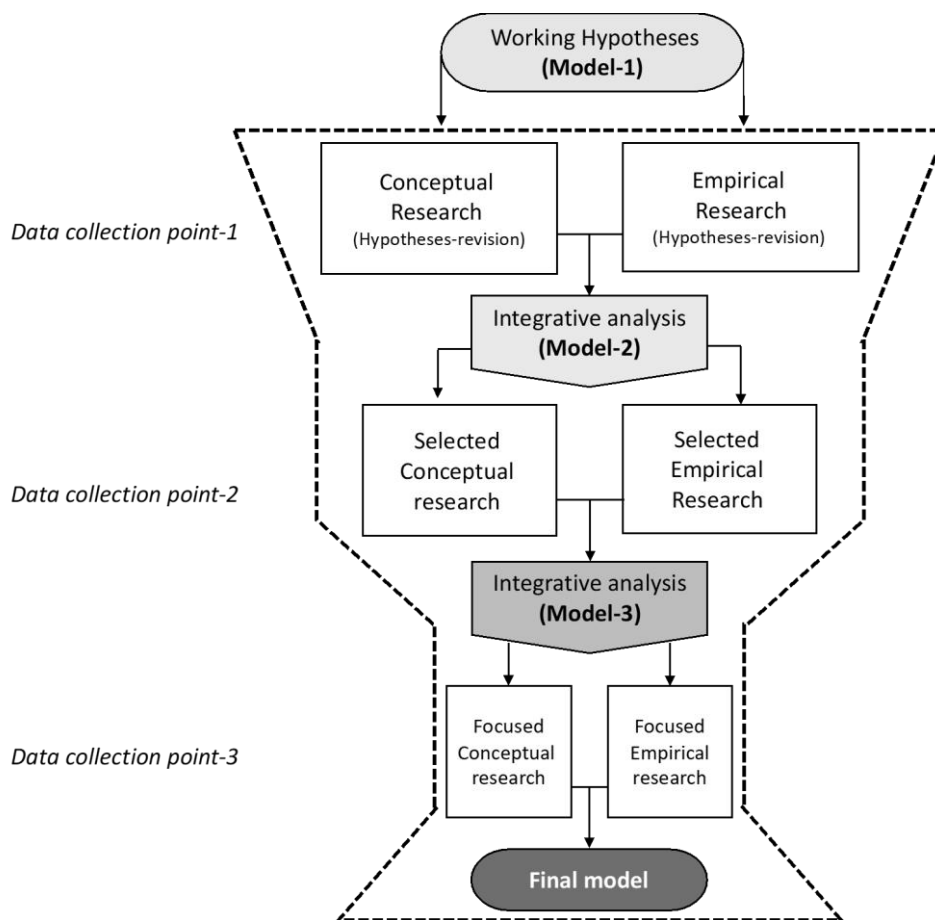
Since self-formation is a broad concept, it causes challenges for researchers to remit the scope of their studies. A possible solution for this issue is working with hypotheses. Hypotheses permit limiting the scope of exploration but at the same time still incorporating different aspects or manifestations of a researched phenomenon. A list of hypotheses of academic self-formation was formulated based on the initial summative theorisation (Marginson, 2014), the theoretical framework of reflexive agency, the pre-established conceptual framework of academic self-formation (see Figure 2), and the findings of previous empirical studies. It is important to note that hypotheses here are not tested by using statistical techniques as in quantitative studies, but they are rather employed as a line of inquiries that guides data collection and analysis processes. Table 1 presents the three main hypotheses regarding the condition, resource, and product of academic self-formation, which consist of respective sub-hypotheses. Each sub-hypothesis is a focus of conceptual and empirical investigations that aim to elaborate the self-formation idea. The first hypothesis, "students are strong agents", and its three sub-hypotheses will be the focus of this working paper.

**Table 1: Hypotheses of academic self-formation in higher education**

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>Sub-hypotheses</b>
<i>H1. Students are strong agents</i>	<i>H1.1. Students develop personal projects</i>
	<i>H1.2. Students build active relationship with their environments</i>
	<i>H1.3. Students deliberately reflect on themselves</i>
<i>H2. Students' agency practice is conditioned by contextual resources</i>	<i>H2.1. Intercultural interaction fosters self-formation</i>
	<i>H2.2. Mobility fosters self-formation</i>
	<i>H2.3. Communicative competence fosters self-formation</i>
<i>H3. Students construct the new self</i>	<i>H3.1. Students use multiplicity and hybridity as possible strategies for self-formation</i>
	<i>H3.2. Student self-formation is ever-becoming</i>

The above hypotheses will be examined by using a research design termed morphogenetic design in this study. Following Archer's (2010) Morphogenetic model that consists of conditioning, interaction, and elaboration phases, the morphogenetic research design aims to allow reflexivity in the process of conceptual and empirical development of the self-formation framework. As can be seen in Figure 3, the study begins with the list of hypotheses as a conditioning factor of the research process, which determines research scope and the focus of the data collection and analysis. The working hypotheses then will be explored by using both conceptual and empirical data, which leads to the interaction between the provisional hypotheses and relevant data collected in three consecutive points. This stage also includes interaction between conceptual and empirical data, which will complement each other in examining what self-formation is. As a result, the initial working hypotheses will be revised and elaborated. The updated hypotheses will then condition the following cycle of morphogenesis of the self-formation theory, with gradually narrowing-down foci and emerging new themes. This iterative design will enable a reflexive approach to understanding what self-formation is on the conceptual level and how students engage with it on the empirical level.





**Figure 3: Morphogenetic research design for conceptual development of self-formation**

A methodological grounding for the morphogenetic research design is provided by ethnography that can incorporate both empirical and theoretical levels into exploring the self-formation phenomenon embedded in South Korean learning culture. On the one hand, it is generally used in developing theories inductively, with its emphases on insider perspectives acquired in natural settings (Brewer, 2000; Fetterman, 2019; Hammersley, 2007). Indeed, ethnography is a strong methodology to produce a rich and thick description of a South Korean students' self-formation, characterised by longitudinal data gathering with an emerging focus. On the other, it is also valuable in deductively testing theories pertaining to social life (Creswell, 2002; Hammersley, 2007). The use of multiple data sources and data collection points allows the empirical findings about self-formation to be cross-checked and deductively elaborated over an extended period of time (Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Mills & Morton, 2013). Although the ethnographic approach is underpinning the research design, this

paper does not present the preliminary findings as traditional ethnography as the study is still in progress.

### **Two types of data: conceptual and empirical**

In a morphogenetic research design, two types of data are involved: conceptual and empirical data (see Figure 3). Conceptual data refers to existing theories and research programmes that can inform theoretical elaboration of academic self-formation. Working with conceptual data will help researchers build a theory through critical engagement with the literature. In order to select the most informative and relevant literature, conceptual data is only collected when a theory and its research programme share three core assumptions underlying self-formation. First, self-formation is assumed to be universal across different cultures, developmental stages, and life scenes. Second, self-formation is empirically researchable. This assumption is necessary to justify the initial theorisation of self-formation that was drawn from extensive interviews with international students (Marginson & Sawir, 2011) as well as existing research endeavours surrounding the self-formation idea, including the current study. Third, self-formation is assumed to be distinctive in higher education. For the conceptual investigation of self-formation, therefore, grand theories that explain universal phenomena, have formed a considerable research programme, and acknowledge higher education as a distinctive setting are critically reviewed upon the working hypotheses of academic self-formation. Conversation between the self-formation framework and the existing theories is conducted in a reflexive way with gradually more selective data collection, following the morphogenetic research design.

Collecting empirical data about self-formation should be strategic in selecting study samples and research contexts, according to their ability to produce rich data about the phenomenon. All 14 participants in the current study are South Korean first-year students enrolled in a full-time postgraduate course as either local (7 students in Korea) or international students (7 students in the UK). This working paper uses the data set from international students only to draw preliminary findings presented below. A summary of the participants is displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2: A brief description of the participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Field of study</b>	<b>Funding</b>
<b>Donghee</b>	Female	33	University 1	Master	Social Science	Self-funded
<b>Jisun</b>	Female	27	University 2	Master	Social Science	Self-funded
<b>Sarang</b>	Female	28	University 3	Master	Humanities	Self-funded
<b>Mijoo</b>	Female	27	University 4	PhD	Humanities	Partly funded
<b>Jinho</b>	Male	28	University 4	PhD	STEM	Self-funded
<b>Min</b>	Male	27	University 4	PhD	STEM	Fully funded
<b>Kibum</b>	Male	27	University 4	PhD	STEM	Self-funded

First-year international students who have never studied abroad are selected because they might experience more significant mobility or educational transition, which are expected to stimulate their self-formation processes. Focusing on postgraduate students in different fields of study allows observing a greater level of immersion in disciplinary knowledge and self-reflexivity during their academic self-formation. Empirical data generation lasts for an academic year because the self-formation process cannot be fully captured by a snapshot of student experience. The prolonged data collection from two participant groups in two research contexts can be made possible by conducting a recurrent time mode of fieldwork with intermittent data collection points (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). Multiple methods can be adopted in order to produce a thick description of students' self-formation, such as class observation, fieldnotes, photo-elicitation, and formal and informal interviews, all of which were used in this study. Throughout the study, these methods evolve, informed by analysis processes between data collection points, generating more selective and focused data as the research progresses (Spradley, 2016).

Both conceptual and empirical data collection for the present research are still in progress. However, preliminary findings about international students' academic self-formation emerged during the intermittent data collection and analysis in the

recurrent mode of ethnography (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). These findings regarding the hypothesis of reflexive agency for self-formation will be discussed in the following section.

## **Preliminary findings about reflexive agency**

The first working hypothesis of this study suggests that students in higher education are active agents who are in charge of formation of the self. Underlying this hypothesis are three manifestations of reflexive agency: students' personal projects (H1.1), active relationship with the environments (H1.2), and self-reflexivity (H1.3). This section critically examines each sub-hypothesis by integrating both conceptual data from psychology and empirical data from international South Korean students. I'll start by talking about how students adopt and develop their personal projects. Then I'll look at how students reflect on the environment as well as on themselves as they strive to be their ideal selves. Finally, the role of disciplinary knowledge in academic self-formation will be discussed, which is not fully captured by the elaboration of the three sub-hypotheses of reflexive agency. I draw on theories of college student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000); social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001); student learning theories (e.g., Marton & Saljo, 1976); and information processing theories (e.g., Paas & Van Merriënboer, 1994) – plus on students' own accounts of their self-forming experiences.

### **Students develop personal projects**

Self-formation provides an answer for 'what higher education is' from a perspective of what students do in higher education. Thus, a good starting point of the conceptual research is existing theories of college students' experience. The previous extensive developmental theories of college students seem to share a commonality of the culminating stage of heightened self-reflexivity. Repeatedly demonstrated by multiple theories, student formation through college experience is a developmental journey from impulsiveness to self-control, from conventional to reflective thinking, from dependence to autonomy, and from externally to internally

determined identity, all indicating an increased sense of self or self-reflexivity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

However, this also means that student development models often diminish the role of students' personal projects by implying student experience as an identical, linear, and unidirectional path from a less desirable to a more desirable status. This might be because their major research purpose is to aid teaching and institutional practices, which assumes the passive role of students whose development is mostly dependent on the effectiveness of teachers and universities. Although, some researchers acknowledge students' agential relationship with the contextual factors surrounding them. Person-Environment interaction theories reject the traditional focus on the direct influences of environment on college students and inquire about how individual factors interfere (Strange & Banning, 2001). For Astin (1984), for instance, student success is determined by the extent of students' involvement with the resources given in the institution. This approach, however, still talks about how university's projects can be better achieved by students' involvement, not about how students' personal projects can be realised in higher education. In short, existing student development theories in higher education are more concerned with explaining student formation than with student self-formation.

Along with the conceptual part of research, empirical data from international Korean students in British higher education was also analysed concerning the sub-hypothesis of personal projects. Interviews with students clearly indicated that they adopt and develop multiple personal projects into and through higher education. This supports the claim that entering higher education does not mean for the students to realise what deemed desirable by others, but to construct one's own ideal self. Each participant in the study had distinctive aims and expectations for their study abroad. When I met the participants during their first few weeks of their study, students were asked to freely talk about their journey to British higher education. A doctoral student, Mijoo, listed various reasons for her choice to study abroad: to develop an international career in her field of study, to gain better systematic support for academic learning, to contribute to the literature, to experience intercultural collaboration. Mijoo's project building is centred on her study, whereas not everyone

links their projects to academic knowledge. Jisun, a master's student, for example, aspires to develop a desired image of the self (educated, logical, confident, decisive, and open-minded); to avoid hierarchical culture prevalent in Korea; to place herself in a multi-cultural environment; and to explore her general interest in her field of study – by attending international higher education. Disciplinary knowledge, for Jisun, takes rather a secondary position in building her personal projects in higher education, while it is a primary source Mijoo's multiple projects. The different extent of engagement with knowledge in these two examples indicates that students' personal projects are neither identical nor linear as earlier student development theories implied.

Students' accounts of their personal projects help uncover the gap in the existing literature of college student development for explaining higher education as academic self-formation. According to previous theories on college experiences, higher education is what transforms students in a way that universities find more desirable. What is not discussed is what students desire to achieve in the self through higher education. When student development is researched collectively without considering individual students' distinctive projects, the multiple dimensions of self-formation and the resultant new students cannot be captured. Also, the role of academic knowledge is not necessarily addressed by the existing frameworks of general student formation. Individuals seem to display varying degrees of knowledge engagement in their adoption of personal projects, and this is expected to affect the whole academic self-formation journey. When students' multiple personal projects built on disciplinary knowledge are accepted as a key factor in student development, higher education can be defined as what students agentially engage in to actualise what they desire for themselves through academic knowledge; in other words, academic self-formation.

### **Students build active relations with their environment**

Personal projects are related to the motivation of students for entering higher education. An agency-focused perspective on human motivation, therefore, can elaborate the hypothesis of academic self-formation. It is undoubtful to argue that the most influential agentic theory of human motivation is Self-Determination Theory

(SDT; E. Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT is the investigation of people's motivation as a signal of human agency (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In SDT, all human beings, including college students, are inherently "agentic and inspired, striving to learn; extend themselves; master new skills and apply their talents responsibly" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69). Such inner drives of students are difficult to be identified when human behaviours in higher education are reduced to what is shaped by external driving forces or restraining forces.

When students' intrinsic motivation in higher education is acknowledged, they are liberated from the necessity of external cues that were believed to be a prerequisite for instigating human behaviours, thereby given with a space for their agency to play its role. The innate growth tendency leads individuals to intentionally and actively "seek and engage challenges in their environments" as they endeavour to realise their desirable self (E. L. Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 8). Such propensities can provide a theoretical support for the hypothesis of students' active relationship with their environments; as can be seen in mobile students' choice of "mobility to alter their space of possible" (Marginson, 2014, p. 10) or shift of their habitat in Bourdieu's (1977) term. Students' active agency in their intrinsic, growth-oriented propensities seems to be left out in the difficulty-coping approaches (e.g., theories of transition/adaptation of international students) or the over-emphasis on the instrumental value of higher education (e.g., human capital approaches).

The challenge-seeking nature of students in higher education is evidenced by empirical findings that point to students' agential relation with the environment. Participants in this study were found to not only cope with difficulties in their environments but also intentionally produce it, by avoiding, creating, and destroying the environment. Attending higher education, for some students, was a way (a) to simply move away from problematic contextual settings/situations (from *negative* to *neutral*); while for others it was a choice (b) to improve their current environment to a more desirable status (from *neutral* to *positive*); or (c) to intentionally place themselves in difficult situations for personal growth (from *neutral* to *negative*). While the first two forms of self-environment relationship tend to be reactive to external rewards/punishment, challenge-seeking behaviour seems to be the most distinctive

manifestation of student agency as it cannot be explained by the given stimulus. In fact, international higher education for the students in this study was often described as a deliberate pursuit of difficulties and challenges out of their comfort zone. During class observations, students often look 'awkward' in the new learning environment, which can be interpreted as struggling by deficit models. However, students' accounts show that they deliberately choose to be in such uncertain situations. In Mijoo's accounts about moving to British higher education, she said:

"It would have been easiest for me to stay in South Korea for doctoral study. But if it is that easy, my thesis would be written for no reason, with no academic significance, which doesn't worth years of my life."

Giving up an obviously more convenient path is a quintessential example of student formation in higher education that is significantly shaped by strong agency. For Kibum, studying in the UK was similar to "a baby chick hatching an egg". He was aware that British universities' emphasis on independent learning makes his study relatively slower and harder, but he thought "in the long term it would be a better way to learn".

The mechanisms underlying the challenge-pursuing behaviours can be provided with a theoretical elaboration by Bandura's (2001) Social Cognitive theory. An indispensable element in social cognitive theory is self-efficacy. Bandura (2001) proposed that efficacy beliefs are "the foundation of human agency" (p. 10) because the ability to exercise agency depends on people's conception about the self that enables or hinders it. According to the long haul of empirical research on self-efficacy, the ways in which self-efficacy influences human functioning are through determining personal goals and aspirations; shaping people's expectation of the outcomes as a result of their efforts-making; and conditioning how obstacles and challenges are interpreted by individuals (Bandura, 2018; Bandura, Freeman, & Lightsey, 1999). These functions of self-efficacy explain how student agents would actively create discrepancy in their environments throughout the process of academic self-formation. Why students attend higher education depends on their self-efficacy that influences students' development of challenging personal projects. Students' self-efficacy, which defines students' reflexivity on themselves, influences



their decision to venture outside of their comfort zones through higher education. How students respond to structure is also closely related to their self-efficacy; those with greater efficacy beliefs tend to interpret the given social order as something that they can change, maybe through higher education. As such, students' reflexivity on their agency and the given structure, including how they perceive their efficaciousness, shapes their higher education experiences. This is why higher education should be defined as self-formation by taking into account students' reflexive agency.

As seen in both conceptual and empirical data, student agents seem to be capable of acting upon their environments in various ways (avoidance, creation, and destruction) that are conditioned by their self-reflexivity. This section has shown the power of psychological approaches in articulating student agency in higher education. Relevant empirical findings can elaborate and be elaborated by such theoretical explanations about students' reflexive agency. One point that has not been explored in this section is the role of disciplinary knowledge in students' academic self-formation, which is highlighted by the participants during the interviews. For instance, one participant notes that "Korean research fields of art are so insular that you won't find what's prevalent in Korea in international journals. So, I want to introduce Korean work to the world". Another student said, "when I was working as an engineer for a company, I experienced a lot of technical limitations and lies in the field of engineering research... I want to solve that problem". Field-specific aspects of self-formation, however, cannot be investigated in depth by using psychology of human motivation (Self-Determination Theory) or behaviour (Social Cognitive Theory), which does not necessarily explain the distinctive role of knowledge.

### **Students deliberately reflect on themselves**

From interviews with and observations of the participants, knowledge engagement emerged as a critical element in academic self-formation. How academic learning in higher education is related to students' self-formation can be informed by theories of student learning. This section will briefly review research on student learning in higher education, while revisiting the sub-hypothesis of self-reflexivity.

The Student Approaches to Learning (SAL; Biggs, 1978; Entwistle & Ramsden, [1983] 2015; Marton & Saljo, 1976) tradition is a widely-used framework to investigate learning experiences of university students (Richardson, 2015). The SAL literature has been praised to shift focus from the teachers or institutions to the students (Case & Marshall, 2009), just as the self-formation discourse confers the transformative power to student agents. The central argument of the SAL theories is that the outcome of education depends on the qualitative difference of learning. They distinguish two ways of learning: *deep* and *surface* approaches to learning. Students who adopt a deep approach to learning are known to “take an active role and see learning as something that they themselves do” by working with self-regulated strategies and constructing their own knowledge structure (Richardson, 2005, p. 675). Those who employ a surface approach are known to “take a passive role and see learning as something that just happens to them” as manifested in their focus on external regulation (e.g., teachers, exams) and memorising facts (Richardson, 2005, p. 675). This “deep/surface dichotomy” (Case & Marshall, 2009, p. 11) with more values placed on deep learning has led to decades of research effort to find out how to encourage deep approaches to learning (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017). Promoting deep learning while restraining surface learning through higher education resonates with the student development theories that imagine linear, unidirectional, and homogeneous student transformation from unfavourable to favourable status. As already discussed, in this way, students’ self-formation guided by multiple personal projects cannot be explained.

Beyond the either-or perspective in deep/surface learning models, there is a need to delve deeper into learning as self-forming processes, whether deep or surface. In theories of human cognitive learning (Miyake et al., 2000; Sweller, 2011), the reliance on memorisation in surface learning and the focus on understanding of deep learners are similarly self-regulated and reflexive. When humans encounter with new knowledge, it is theorised to be processed via ‘working memory’ in human cognitive system (Baddeley, 1992). Working memory is “responsible for the control and regulation of cognitive processes (i.e., executive functions)”, allowing individuals to self-regulate their responses to the environmental stimulus that carry new knowledge to be processed and learned (Miyake et al., 2000, p. 51). Working memory manifests

heightened consciousness and the use of mental capacity (or cognitive load; Cognitive Load Theory; Paas & Van Merriënboer, 1994) required for carrying out a learning task. It can be inferred that learning involves heightened self-reflexivity. Some researchers provide visible evidence for cognitive self-reflexivity by using neuroimaging technology. For instance, the prefrontal cortex was found to be activated when humans engage in self-set goals and self-regulations (e.g., Shimamura, 2000), which signals self-reflexivity. The use of working memory in the “goal-directed neurocognitive processes” is necessary in processing new knowledge (Garner, 2009, p. 407). Thus, student learning is cognitively, psychologically, and even neuroscientifically claimed to facilitate self-reflexivity.

Self-reflexivity activated during academic learning is frequently identified in the interview data. One of the findings distinctive in South Korean culture is self-critical reflexivity. At the end of each term throughout the academic year, I asked participants about any new discovery about the self. All participants picked up problems and criticised themselves harshly. Mijoo’s answered,

“New discovery? I have a weird habit. I cannot control myself where there’s no one who can control me. Doctoral students should not be like that, right? Why am I still like this? [...] I feel like I’m gradually going down and down in terms of making efforts. I make little and little effort. [...] Why can’t I use the given time more effectively? I blame myself every night.”

Kibum’s answer was also self-critical:

“I realised that I get stressed a lot when the results are not good. I place too much value on my study so, my mood fluctuates depending on my performance. [...] I also learned that expressing this stress to others (family) is not a good attitude. I shouldn’t have regarded my work as more important than my relationship with others.”

A similarly critical view on the self was found in Min’s account as well. “I wasted a lot of time this term. When I could go to lab, there were social pressure. But here, I have nothing like that. I learnt that I’m too generous to myself.” These critical comments about the self were almost always made with reference to effort-making that is measured by the amount of time spent on studying. “If I spend 8 hours for studying, I would be satisfied with myself”, said Jinho, while Jisun complained that “nobody told me how long a master student study a day. I wanted a definite answer like ‘three hours per day’”. Sarang was so proud of herself when she stayed all night up for completing her assignment. These new themes of self-critics and effort-making in

South Korean students' academic self-formation need further investigation, thereby were included when revising the working hypotheses.

In this section, self-reflexivity linked to students' learning was discussed in the light of cognitive psychology. However, such a psychological perspective on student learning in higher education provides a limited explanation of academic self-formation because it focuses on how or how much a student learns, rather than on what the student makes out of the learning. Learning theories confine academic self-formation into individual cognitive processes. Academic self-formation is not a theory of micro-psychological process of students' experiences in higher education but a way to conceptualise higher education at a broader, social, and macro-level. Knowledge in self-formation, therefore, should be transformational not only in a cognitive or psychological way, but also at the social, political, and economic level.

### **The role of academic knowledge in self-formation**

Academic self-formation as more than an individual and cognitive phenomenon is supported by students' accounts of their own experiences in higher education. The complicated relationship between the self, knowledge, and society was consistently accounted for by participants in this study. For instance, Jisun, a master's student who studies Media and Communication, said:

"My dream is to deliver a message to people. If I could change a few people's minds, then it would be rewarding for me. Before I started studying Feminism here, I had no idea what the term "intersectionality" meant. If I could deliver this concept to others in an easier way, then wouldn't it help solve social problems like social polarisation? Somehow, if I learn, society learns as well. In this way, I think the knowledge I am learning is really valuable".

Knowledge is often seen by the participants as an instrument to achieve their personal projects that are not only individual but also social. Kibum pointed out that studying artificial intelligence as a doctoral student is one way through which he can "contribute joyfully to the society" and "make some meaningful influences on the society". Although more research is needed, students' self-formation projects appear to incorporate social formation when academic knowledge is taken into account.

Students' accounts about 'working on the self for working on the world' also show their active relationship with the environment. It seems that students want to become a desired self who can make changes in their contexts through their engagement with knowledge. In other words, the reflexive relationship between agency and structure might be mediated by academic knowledge. For instance, students reflexively make choices about their field of study in between their active agency and structural factors. Jinho chose engineering over mathematics as his major because he thought applied science suits him better in terms of his own value system. He said, "Mathematics does some cool proving, but I don't think it fits me because it is not necessarily used by people. ... So, I chose engineering, the science that is beneficial to others' life". Such self-reflexive choice is also mentioned by Mijoo. Regarding the choice of research topic, it was her identity as Asian, Korean and international student in a Western country that made her study Asian history. She said,

"There's no chance for an Asian to survive if studying Western history, because you don't have the internalised identity or language to understand the essence of it. So, if a Korean studies Humanities in a Western country, almost everyone studies an East-based topic. That is how we survive and make choices tactically."

What students learn appears to reveal who they are for themselves as well as for the world to which they belong. This function of knowledge in between the self and society should be considered when revising the sub-hypothesis of the active self-environment relationship.

How students perceive the current self/society, imagine the future self/society, and work on the self/society with reference to their fields of study is beyond the scope of this working paper. These topics are the focus of the other hypotheses of the resource and product of academic self-formation. Although, a few findings about self-reflexivity beyond cognitive learning can be mentioned briefly here. The interrelationship between the self, society, and knowledge is not a new finding in higher education research. Although there is a lack of one grand, overarching theory of the role of academic knowledge on student formation, there is a research programme that has investigated the changing relations between student and disciplinary knowledge in higher education. As one of the ongoing CGHE research

projects, the project called *Knowledge, Curriculum and Student Agency* is led by researchers in the UK, USA and South Africa (e.g., Ashwin et al., 2021).

Their empirical works have revealed two self-reflexive mechanisms underlying the evolving self-knowledge-society link: (1) the development of sense of self in relation with disciplinary knowledge; (2) the enhanced agency by acquiring specialised knowledge. The former is about who the self is, while the latter is concerning what the self can do. When Ashwin and his colleagues traced students' accounts of knowledge and personal projects throughout higher education, students were reported to develop more immersive accounts of knowledge: from the outer world to the inner self (Ashwin, Abbas, & McLean, 2014). Accordingly, their accounts of their own projects also transformed: from the focus on the self to the inclusion of the broader society. The emergence of the self in students' conception of knowledge indicates students' growing self-reflexivity throughout their engagement with knowledge. Meanwhile, the emergence of world in students' accounts of personal projects implies that students become more empowered and confident about their capability in the world. The shifting self-reflexivity followed by changing conception of knowledge has been echoed across disciplines and countries (Case & Marshall, 2015; Abbas et al., 2016). If their observations are correct, the formation of knowledge should be properly considered when researching the formation of the self.

The main argument of the research programme is that: it is knowledge that makes higher education transformational (Ashwin, 2020). It places more emphasis on how "students are transformed by their engagement with structured bodies of knowledge at university" (p. 68) than on how students transform themselves. Although student agency is seen as important, students' roles are imagined to be more about allowing the transformational power of knowledge to be activated. Echoing the importance of disciplinary knowledge in higher education, academic self-formation interprets the previous findings in a different way; knowledge mediates the relation between the student and society by stimulating self-reflexivity. Academic self-formation is a mediated exercise of reflexivity between agency and structure via knowledge as a key mediating artefact. This mediated human formation is extensively documented

and theorised by Vygotsky's (1997) Sociocultural theory that explains human development through mediated relationships with the society. Conceptual research on Vygotsky's work is in progress.

As seen in this section, academic knowledge conditions students' reflexive agency. Students' fields of study affect their adoption of personal projects (H1.1), how they actively interact with the environment (H1.2), and how they reflect on themselves (H1.3). This shows how the academic aspect of self-formation can serve as a rich and valuable research focus when investigating self-formation in higher education. The pre-established hypotheses about reflexive agency will be revised by considering the pervasive role of disciplinary knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Although self-formation calls for an agentic narrative of student experience in higher education, it does not exclude any negative accounts or emotions that students go through. Some participants in this study did struggle and not every student's experience was a successful journey to make the ideal self. One of the students studying in the UK failed all courses in her first term and had to suspend her study. Nevertheless, where there was struggle, there was also determination. The student's failure in coursework was not necessarily failed self-formation, but only an ongoing process of self-formation. Suspension was intentionally chosen so that she can save money for her rest of the study and improve her English.

Most of the participants expressed anxiety and difficulties caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Their studies were disrupted, their travel to the UK was restricted, and online learning mode burdened students with another layer of transition. However, despite these unexpected extra risks in addition to the anticipated challenges out of language-related, social, and financial comfort zones, participants in my study were determined to take the risks and come to the UK instead of staying safe back home. Thus, researching self-formation during the pandemic provided a rare opportunity to unveil international students' self-determination and strong agency.

This paper presented how to research higher education as students' academic self-formation. A possible way to investigate academic self-formation by using the morphogenetic research design was demonstrated. Hypotheses of reflexive agency were established and explored to address the research questions about what higher education as academic self-formation is and how students engage in it. Both conceptual and empirical data were collected and analysed in an interactive way, which led to elaboration of the hypotheses. The revised sub-hypotheses of reflexive agency are displayed below in Table 3:

**Table 3: Revised sub-hypotheses of reflexive agency in academic self-formation**

	<b>Sub-hypotheses</b>
Initial model	<i>H1.1.</i> Students develop their personal projects
	<i>H1.2.</i> Students have active relationship with their environments
	<i>H1.3.</i> Students deliberately reflect on themselves
Revised model	<i>H1.1.</i> Students' multiple projects for self-formation incorporate projects for social formation when academic knowledge is considered
	<i>H1.2a.</i> Students avoid, alter, and destroy their environments, through higher education
	<i>H1.2b.</i> Students relate to the environment more actively as they become more immersed in knowledge
	<i>H1.3.</i> Students deliberately reflect on who they are and what they can do in light of their field of study

The rising concept of self-formation can serve as a theoretical lens for empirical re-examinations of traditional assumptions underlying higher education research, incorporating less agentic narratives about students. In order to facilitate such a contribution, the full research project on which this working paper is based intends to develop the theoretical framework of self-formation, whilst this paper concentrates on assisting methodological decisions for the following researchers. As a result, both conceptual and empirical contribution of the study can help to further future research on higher education as self-formation.



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