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**Higher Education as Self-Formation**

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**Introduction**

Between 2004 and 2009, together with colleagues, I was engaged in data collection among international students in Australia and New Zealand. We interviewed almost 300 students; four fifths from East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, all in degree length programmes. Extended semi-structured interviews are a conversation in which the object of the research, the interviewee, has some scope introduce new concepts and unexpected topics and become a subject of research. This methodological framing helped us to think differently about the students and their education.

Social science normally sees international students as marginal subjects struggling to cope. In contrast we found, as did Catherine Montgomery in her ethnographic study of international students in UK conducted at the same time, [[1]](#footnote-1) *strong agents* that were piloting the course of their own lives, though under circumstances they did not control. These students were engaged not in formation by others so much as *self-formation*. And some of them spoke brilliantly, reflexively, about the joys and terrors of self-formation as a practice of self-determining human *freedom*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The research also suggested to me that the notion of students as reflexive self-determining persons, using higher education to augment their selves and advance their freedoms, might apply to all students, not just international.

It is this insight I want to develop this evening: the simple, far-reaching idea of *higher education as self-formation, and the expansion of freedom*. I believe that the idea of self-formation as freedom contains all we might want from the higher educational process—and that this orientation to students and to learning-in-society is potentially superior to the alternatives.

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, the institution, opportunities and other circumstances, only the learner does the learning. It is also consistent with modernity itself, which for several intersecting reasons, including universal markets, political democracy and mass education, foregrounds identity and agency. Autonomous agency has been called the key concept of modernity.[[3]](#footnote-3) For Anthony Giddens, modern life is a never-ending ‘reflexive project of the self’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Consider career, consumption, conversation in social networks, fashion, body management, cultural labels, the identity politics of left and right, even the self matching the self in dating websites. Here mainstream educational psychology and economics, have not been especially modern, or democratic. They model the student as an empty vessel for others to fill, and state that the value of the vessel once filled is shaped by market exchange and not by the graduate’s own objectives.

The remainder of the lecture will attempt to ground the idea of higher education as self-formation in freedom. It works largely in educational philosophy, while drawing also on empirical social science examples. First, I discuss self-forming freedom in Amartya Sen and Michel Foucault. Second, I review Confucian self-cultivation through learning, the Bildung tradition in Germany and the American pragmatists; touching also on the immersion in knowledge fundamental to higher education. Third, I consider the most difficult piece of the puzzle, the relation between individual self-formation and social formation, which I call socially-nested self-formation. Finally, I compare higher education as self-formation to other constructions of the student trajectory such as investment in human capital, or social position, and the student-as-consumer. Self-formation does what the consumption paradigm pretends to do, but does not do. It puts the student at the centre of the frame.

**Agency freedom**

What idea is more potent than freedom? In institutions devoted to education we care also about equality and solidarity, yet mostly because we want all to access freedom and its conditions and means. Freedom is the heart of the political cultures shaped by the French Revolution, including those of Anglo-America. This drives the never wholly resolved tension between the individual and the social that is inherent in those political cultures.

There are many accounts of freedom but I find Amartya Sen’s account of self-determination to be 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.’[[5]](#footnote-5). ‘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 in understanding self-formation in higher education is to assume students are self-responsible adults, not children.

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 negative freedom in Isaiah Berlin.[[6]](#footnote-6) 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.[[7]](#footnote-7) 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 is about being ‘master of my fate’ and ‘captain of my soul’, as in *Invictus,* the poem by William Ernest Henley that sustained Nelson Mandela during his 27 years in South African prison.[[8]](#footnote-8) 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. 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 ‘depend on the nature of the social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Inequality, poverty and discrimination stratify the agency of individuals and groups. Yet in the agency perspective, structural determination is never absolute. It is disrupted by contingency and by agency.[[10]](#footnote-10) Structures are always partly open. Closed systems sit within larger open systems. Agency is not just a modernist trope, it is the way through for disadvantaged populations, as Sue Clegg points out.[[11]](#footnote-11) Michel Foucault notes the self is the only object that one can freely will, ‘without having to take into consideration external determinations.’[[12]](#footnote-12) He locates agency ‘in the constant interplay between strategies of power and resistance.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Reflexivity mediates between structure and agency. Higher education enhances the capacity for reflexivity. It grows the space for freedom.

In fact, all three Sen aspects of freedom are advanced by higher education, especially effective freedom, the capacity of the individual to act, and agency of the will. The OECD publishes data on the contribution of higher education to graduate agency.[[14]](#footnote-14) There is a close association between degree holding and having skills in information and communications technology, connecting effectively to government, trusting people, managing money, and so on.

Let’s turn from Sen to another way into higher education, self-formation and freedom, the last three years Foucault’s lectures to the College de France (1981 to 1984). For Foucault, as Stephen Ball puts it, ‘freedom is the capacity and opportunity to participate in one’s self-formation.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Foucault knows about the openness of the present, and tells people they are ‘much freer than they feel’;[[16]](#footnote-16) but he is at pains to emphasise that freedom is a process of struggle[[17]](#footnote-17) an often arduous ‘work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

In the last lectures Foucault shifts his project from the history of the docile subject of domination, whose individuality is regulated by the normalising practices of the state, to the history of the active subject and the potential for freedom in which one can become something one was not.[[19]](#footnote-19) Foucault is most concerned with control freedom in Sen’s sense, freedom from determination by the state. Here an ‘ethic of the self’ is ‘indispensable’, he states. ‘There is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Foucault reviews the ‘great culture of self’ that evolved in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds between Plato’s fourth century BCE in Athens and fourth century CE Rome.[[21]](#footnote-21) The autonomous self became seen as its own end, without the constraints of mediating institutions or objective.[[22]](#footnote-22) This contrasted with the Christian period that followed, with its theme of the renunciation of the self. Individuals had to subordinate themselves to God and his ministers to know and to care for themselves.[[23]](#footnote-23) They were less free. However, Hellenic/Roman autonomy was achieved only by hard work of the self on the self. Foucault discusses practices of the autonomous self, including meditation, self-examination, rules of ethical conduct, truth telling (parrhesia), and the ‘other life’ practised by the Stoics and Cynics. He notes that while ‘the theme of return to the self’ recurs in modern culture, as yet we have ‘nothing to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self’.

In their criticism and self-criticism the Greek and Roman practices of the self were more consistent and more advanced. The Platonists held out the other world as the point of reference against which this world could be judged. For the Cynics, if life was truly a life of truth, ‘must it not be an *other* life, a life which is radically and paradoxically other?’[[24]](#footnote-24) In self-formation we place ourselves in doubt, and in this lies new possibilities.[[25]](#footnote-25) This leads Foucault to his terminal insight, the last sentence in the last lecture on 28 March 1984:

But what I would like to stress in conclusion is this: there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; there can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life (l’autre monde et de la vie autre’).[[26]](#footnote-26)

What is the relevance to higher education? First, self-formation. Ball notes that while education is a key site ‘in which the processes of normalisation are enacted’, it could become ‘a locus of struggle for productive processes of self-formation and freedom’. Second, Foucault’s final challenging idea, taking us to the outer reaches of agency and creativity: in self-formation we can become something other than we are, and find a truth that is other, different. Third, Foucault’s self-transformation resonates with the Bildung idea in education (as he notes);[[27]](#footnote-27) while his specific focus on self-transformation through the painstaking work of self on self resonates with Confucian self-cultivation (which he does not mention). As in Greece and Rome, self-formation in higher education is modelled in specific practices. It is time to look at these.

**Self-cultivation**

Self-formation in education is taken up in varying ways in different cultures.[[28]](#footnote-28) The older practice is Confucian self-cultivation. Zhao and Deng state that ‘the idea of person-making is at the heart of the Confucian heritage of educational thinking. It is the ‘precondition’ for developing ‘the critical and creative potential of the individual and enabling him or her to fulfil social… functions.’ In a comparison of self-formation East and West Zhao and Biesta remark that the Confucian self is never finished but engaged in continuous self-perfection. Education cannot be separated from ‘becoming an ideal and genuine human person.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Confucianism presents a view of the self ‘that is explicitly informed by a moral and ethical dimension.’[[30]](#footnote-30) Classic Confucian education embodies a commitment to the common good. It also serves the state. It emphasises effective freedom and agency freedom more than freedom as control, independence from the state, the main focus in Anglo-American countries.

Dong Zhongshu, who established Confucianism as the theoretical foundation of the Han state, proposed the first imperial academy, Taixue, in 124 BCE.[[31]](#footnote-31) Traditional higher education in China did not take the form of semi-autonomous universities as in Europe but channelled self-cultivation into training and selection for the state bureaucracy. Yet the Confucian idea of *Ren*, humanity in the broad sense, is also at the heart of Chinese self-formation. Weiming Tu states that ‘the great strength of modern East Asia is its … self-definition as a learning civilization,’ which may be ‘the most precious legacy of Confucian humanism’ [[32]](#footnote-32) and shapes Chinese modernization.[[33]](#footnote-33) Others like Zhao and Deng question whether higher education has retained the classical commitment to holistic person-forming, or has collapsed into economic utility and a focus on credentials rather than learning content.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This coincides with the critique of instrumentalism in the West. At the same time, East-West convergence should not be overstated. Jin Li uses learner word association to compare beliefs about learning among students in China and the United States. The Americans were more reflexive about learner’s mental functioning, and inquiry and imagination, and often cited external conditions affecting learning. The Chinese focused less on external conditions, and emphasised how learners actively seek learning on their own, underlining intrinsic motivation and learner agency.[[35]](#footnote-35) They were also more normative, talking about learning in terms of attitudes and action, and hardship, and virtues such as diligence and steadfastness, terms that never surfaced in American talk.[[36]](#footnote-36) The Chinese saw the practical purposes of higher education as important, yet learning and knowledge were also ‘indispensable to their personal lives’ and the path to becoming a better person.[[37]](#footnote-37) This suggests there has been no broad-based evacuation of traditional Confucian practices. Anne Shostya compares business students in New York and Shanghai. Outside class the Chinese students spent an average of 9.6 hours per week in reading and 22.3 hours in study, compared to American students’ 4.4 hours reading and 9.1 hours study.[[38]](#footnote-38) Chinese students are more focused than their American counterparts on the work of ‘self on self’, albeit partly mediated by educational institutions, curricula and examinations.

Now to Bildung. One translation of the German word is ‘self-formation’, along with ‘development’ and ‘inner cultivation’. It is larger than each and includes them all. [[39]](#footnote-39) Bildung is rooted in the Enlightenment thought of Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others. Kant’s definition of the Enlightenment is ‘man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage through the exercise of his own understanding’. The role of education is to cultivate the inner self in intellectual and ethical terms, to form citizens in public rationality for the emerging civil society.[[40]](#footnote-40) Bildung, said Kant, will not happen by itself. Reason will not emerge spontaneously. It rests on training and teaching. Education is ‘the crucial element for evolving humanity’ and sustaining progress, not just in every individual ‘but also on the collective level.’[[41]](#footnote-41)

Bildung resembled Confucian self-cultivation as a holistic project with a strong moral dimension to systematic learning practices, though Bildung placed greater emphasis on the autonomous will, on agency freedom[[42]](#footnote-42) and freedom as control, and focused on civil society not the state. Kant emphasised the need for people to learn to think independently without guidance from the authorities.[[43]](#footnote-43) The universal curriculum also offered a potential escape from the limiting effects of social background. Nevertheless, like Confucianism under the Han dynasty, Bildung was turned to nation-building, for example Wilhelm von Humboldt’s University of Berlin,[[44]](#footnote-44) which he placed at the service of the state. Von Humboldt sought to preserve the original idea of education free of external constraints by prescribing full university autonomy and the freedom to learn and teach. Academics still defend their self-determination by invoking the global culture of the Humboldtian university,[[45]](#footnote-45) but focus on the control freedom of academics, not the self-formation of autonomous students.

Bildung implies an educational process dedicated to being and becoming, to open-ended human potential, not static measures of skills and knowledge. Its notion of perfectibility resembles Confucian self-cultivation in that the goal is never achieved. Rather, self-formation opens new horizons as it proceeds; and the educability of the self-forming learner expands continually.[[46]](#footnote-46) Teaching and learning cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of cause and effect, for there is always ‘an open independent space’, independent of the teacher, for self-formation by the student.[[47]](#footnote-47) This is only a partial space. Teaching, educational structures and the larger socio-cultural world still matter. The core notion of Bildung, of educational subjects that shape themselves through their own actions,[[48]](#footnote-48) retains vitality—though its contemporary advocates place more emphasis than their forebears on practices that recognise diversity.[[49]](#footnote-49)

The American pragmatists who were influenced by Bildung, also saw the formation of free autonomous persons as central. Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* is a ‘theory of Bildung’, especially where he writes about ‘self-discipline’ and a curriculum of ‘humanistic and naturalistic studies.’[[50]](#footnote-50) The pragmatists also gave self-formation their own twist. Their central principle was growth.[[51]](#footnote-51) Mental formation occurred via activity and experience, in natural and cultural environments, through shared language and learned reflexivity.[[52]](#footnote-52) More recent versions of pragmatism have partly shifted the balance from teaching to the self-regulating self-forming learner.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Two factors distinguish self-formation in higher education from the other sites of self-formation: academic teaching, and immersion in knowledges. Kant noted the paradox inherent in teaching self-formation: ‘How is it possible to cultivate freedom by coercion?’[[54]](#footnote-54) The dilemma is less pressing in higher education, where the teacher is the facilitator of already autonomous learners. Immersion in knowledge is the more important signifier of higher education—even though knowledge is underplayed in policy.[[55]](#footnote-55) Referencing Basil Bernstein,[[56]](#footnote-56) Paul Ashwin focuses on transitions between ‘knowledge-as research, knowledge-as-curriculum and knowledge-as-student-understanding’. Tracking these transitions empirically is ‘a powerful way of gaining a sense of the transformative power of higher education because it brings into focus the ways in which higher education transforms students’ understanding and identities’[[57]](#footnote-57) (or the way that students transform themselves). Working within particular bodies of knowledge, students acquire different ‘gazes’ and ‘lenses’ required to access that knowledge,[[58]](#footnote-58) and often acquire distinctive values associated with the discipline. Each body of knowledge leaves distinctive traces in self-formation. In a study of sociology students’ accounts of their discipline, Paul Ashwin, Andrea Abbas and Monica McLean demonstrate that most students move to a more relational understanding over time.[[59]](#footnote-59) They cite Dubet’s comment that students ‘form themselves through the meaning they attribute to knowledge.’[[60]](#footnote-60) The researchers also find engaging with knowledge alone is not sufficient to secure transformed student perspectives. ‘There also needs to be an alignment between students’ personal projects and the focus of disciplinary knowledge’[[61]](#footnote-61), which highlights the role of agency freedom. Ashwin and McVitty note that while ‘knowledge transforms students as they engage with it… students also transform knowledge as they make sense of it.’[[62]](#footnote-62) The mutual transformations of subjects/ knowledge are a rich domain for inquiry.

**Social formation**

The student self is continuously created in a shifting combination of (a) given material conditions, (b) social relations in which the student is embedded and a partner in making, and (c) the agency freedom or active will of the student. All student self-formation is historically grounded and subject to relations of power, and like all localised practices is specific to contexts. What then can be said in general? Though the idea of self-formation is not hegemonic, it is well understood in different parts of the world. The more difficult issue is socially nested self-formation—the relations between self-formation in higher education and the social setting, and the higher education’s role in social formation. This is often seen as a normative question—what kind of social relations or values should enter educational self-formation?[[63]](#footnote-63) Yet it is also empirical—what social relations optimise self-formation, and also vice versa?

In Lev Vygotsky’s social psychology[[64]](#footnote-64) the individual child develops self and social relations as the same process. Strikingly, the infant exercises agency sufficient to draw adults into speech exchange. Early speech in turn builds the child’s social identity and enhances capability, further augmenting agency. The mediation between individual and social is language, a medium both shared and individualisable in which social identity is established. In speech community the mentality of the child is patterned and she/he learns to work on her/his own mind, enabling reflexivity. ‘The true development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, it is from the social to the individual’, states Vygotsky. ‘*An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one*. Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level’.[[65]](#footnote-65) The social, historically prior to the individual, provides the material essential for individual self-formation.

Likewise for C.P. Mead, Vygotsky’s American near contemporary, individual growth or self-formation takes place through mutual exchange in social settings through language. Individuals create shared meanings or solve problems, triggering reflection.[[66]](#footnote-66) Margaret Kettle illustrates the crucial role of language-mediated social relations. Her interview subject, a Thai student studying in Australia, believed that his effective agency simply did not exist until he learned to communicate and interact effectively with local persons.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Bildung and Confucian self-cultivation both emphasise the interdependency of individual and social, each in a distinctive way. According to Ari Kivela, in the Kantian version of Bildung the aim of education is ‘the active autonomous person within the framework of social life’, a rational subject who uses reason in a public way and ‘lives in the public sphere among other individual beings.’[[68]](#footnote-68) For Fichte, as for Vygotsky, Meed and Dewey later, ‘self-consciousness and interpersonal relations emerge only simultaneously.’[[69]](#footnote-69) However, while the social is built onto the individual in Bildung, perhaps the scaffolding could be dismantled. Civil society appears more abstract and more normative than the person.[[70]](#footnote-70) Some contemporary advocates of Bildung want a greater emphasis on interdependent social relations.[[71]](#footnote-71)

There is no doubt that self-formation in the general culture, and in education, are often trapped in high individualism. Individuals, and groups, are nested in a much larger lattice of social exchange, in which the resources and capabilities of self-formation are unevenly distributed. Yet the move to the social should not be overstated. Learning is individually appropriated, and the some imagining individuals exceed their contexts. Individual agency is always both socially separated *and* socially embedded. This double coding of the self, one of the distinctive achievements of Anglo-American-European thought, widens the scope for creative agency that translates itself into otherness, into seeing and doing differently, and then brings that back into the social realm.

On the whole, the social dimension is more central to Confucian thought than in Bildung. In Chinese language, the word ‘Ren’ combines the word for ‘two’ and the word for ‘human being’. Confucian ideas were always both normative and consistently relational. According to Zhao and Biesta, ‘Confucius cared about a person’s individual development, but strongly maintained that it should take place in the context of human relationships.’ For Sun the Confucian view of self has three aspects: the ‘I’ undivided with the universe, the ‘I’ in unity with other human beings, and the wholeness of ‘I’ with self that enables the reflexive work of self on self.[[72]](#footnote-72) Confucianism in education means cultivating all three types of relationship. Hence we find on one hand a direct, unmediated reflexivity, of self on self, as in the Stoics of the Hellenic period described by Foucault. On the other hand there are also mediated forms of reflexivity, of two kinds: in personal relationships, and through engagement in the world as a whole, *Tianxia*, all under heaven, the global public good in its largest sense. Self-formation can be continually monitored by all three forms of reflexivity. Adapting the Confucian text *The Great Learning*, Song Dynasty neo-Confucianism identified eight stages to the realization of self-cultivation: ‘Investigating things; extending one’ s knowledge; making one’ s intentions sincere; rectifying one’ s mind; cultivating one’ s personal life; regulating one’ s family; governing one’ s state; and setting the world at peace and harmony.’[[73]](#footnote-73)

At the same time, in a normative approach to the social there are potential dilemmas for self-formation. It is one matter for education to move beyond methodological individualism to foreground the relational, the contextual and the ecological, as it should do. It is another matter for education to fill the content of the social with its preferred version of social relations. Agency freedom requires that students map the social for themselves. Driving a single social philosophy through higher education violates all three Sen freedoms.

**Other explanations**

Higher education as self-formation has a long pedigree and enables rich educational practice but as you know it is not the only or the dominant idea of higher education. Ashwin, Abbas and McLean examine ways that ‘high quality’ higher education is represented in the policy-related documents of UK government and other actors. There are two broad types of representations. First, the ‘dominant market-oriented generic discourse’, where quality is secured through the consumer power of students in a competitive market of producer institutions. Second, a more fragmented set of discourses that acknowledge transformation in higher education. Disciplinary knowledge and critical thinking are mentioned but the main emphasis is on teaching, on higher education as other-formation.[[74]](#footnote-74) It is striking that overall, in all the material, knowledge and student formation are downplayed, and agency driven self-formation is absent, despite the prevailing student-centeredness rhetoric. Even the alternate discourses do not ‘give a sense of what is special about the knowledge that students are engaging with’ or ‘give a sense of the identities that they develop through this engagement.’[[75]](#footnote-75)

This says more about the ideological nature of policy discussion than the potentials of higher education. The market-consumer paradigm drastically shrinks what higher education has to offer, its value to individuals and societies, when compared to Bildung, Dewey and Confucian self-cultivation. It narrows the practical agenda to immediate student satisfaction, short-term graduate salaries and speculative judgments about long term position. The consumer paradigm is not psychologically sophisticated. It assumes that students salivate at market signals, like Pavlov’s *sobaka* with just one thing on its mind, food. As Ashwin and McVitty remark, it asks students to commodify their own intellectual and personal transformation, with little real agency on offer.[[76]](#footnote-76) How much power do mass consumers ever exercise? Fortunately, students have a less consumptionist take. A recent survey of 9000 students at 123 institutions found 34 per cent believed universities should be accountable for poor graduate employment figures but 68 per cent saw them as accountable for poor teaching. When asked which factors demonstrate that a university has excellent teaching, graduate employment came last out of seven options.[[77]](#footnote-77) Most students have not bought into the idea of the nexus between teaching quality, satisfaction, employment and choice of university. They don’t self-form while shopping at Tesco, or not much. They do in higher education.

And yet—the idea of higher education as an investment in future graduate productivity, in human capital, and the idea that completing a degree enhances employability, are not wholly wrong. Some students, some of the time, make decisions about higher education according to human capital calculations of future earnings. Most students hope that their degree will at enhance their economic prospects; and some behave as consumers.[[78]](#footnote-78) Under a consumption-based policy such behaviours will increase.[[79]](#footnote-79) Likewise, the idea of society as a field of investment in positional goods is salient. Most families see in higher education the potential to maintain or uplift their social position. And no doubt some students want Bourdieu-ian social and cultural capitals.

There are also other ways in which students expand themselves, their resources and projects. Some love the subjects they study and find knowledge an end in itself. Some are looking for a mate. Some are intensively engaged in cultural or political action. Some want to work on global problems. Many are ‘finding themselves’ while moving into adult life. Some want to please their families, self-forming in other-determined ways. And students nurture more than one of these different projects simultaneously, and position them variously, as immediate gratification, as investment, as identity. Many who study mentally expanding disciplines like philosophy have shelved the thorny question of where will take them but they still want a job after graduation.

I say ‘some’, ‘many’, ‘much’, ‘most’. Not ‘all’. None of these paradigms apply to all students, all of the time, everywhere. None is a universal or even hegemonic explanation of higher education. Yet that is how human capital theory, the consumer paradigm, the theory of positional goods, Bourdieu’s capitals, even liberal education, present themselves—as contending claims for the status of single transcendent truth. Each claim is holistic, yet grounded in a partial slice of the world. The framing of higher education should encompass all these phenomena, without elevating any one to dominance. Higher education as self-formation, and self-formation as the expansion of freedoms: that is the inclusive framing. Self-formation includes all the different ways that students build agency and extend their effective freedoms by augmenting themselves. Higher education as socially-nested self-formation takes the investigation to the augmentation of others and the common good.

**Conclusions**

This paper has argued that higher education—education, not ‘the university’, or research—is comprised of processes of student self-formation, and student self-formation is a practice of freedom. Student self-formation has a long history in education, and it is widely understood, especially in East Asia where education often goes deeper than elsewhere. Self-formation is our best explanation and practice of higher education. The way forward is to build on it.

Like all large ideas in education, such as equality of opportunity, self-formation is both a norm that is pursued and a living empirical reality. It is open-ended, it is about potential more than outcomes, and its practices are always incomplete. However, self-formation is both necessary and sufficient to understand higher education. It takes in all the ways students augment themselves. As socially-nested self-formation, it can take in all ways the self-forming students contribute to ongoing social formation. However, it is easier to secure agreement on individual self-formation than on social formation.

Once self-formation is at the heart, student-centred learning can develop more fully and students are the primary unit of analysis. Disciplines, sets of knowledge, may be as important as institutions. What practices can expand self-formation? Fostering the agency freedom of students and its scope to act is *the* key to moving forward. Expanding the space in which students are free of constraint and coercion, for example less authoritarian administration or discriminatory practices, grows freedom as control. Resources and opportunities, such as information, affordable housing and mobility, augment effective freedom. Note also that higher education is only one domain in which students form themselves; and its effectiveness is optimised in synchrony with other domains, such as the home, work and social communications.

Empirical research can investigate the mix and match of each student’s different projects of self-formation, and ivariations in self-formation, its resources and strategies, by country, class, culture, gender, and over time. There is scope to explore how immersion in knowledge, evolving competences, growing self-efficacy and changing values, feed agency freedom and develop the portfolio of personal projects.[[80]](#footnote-80) And there is inquiry into those techniques in higher education that already, now, open the way to truths of the other world and the other life, as Foucault puts it—truths that enable us to become radically other. How is it that by working on ourselves in higher education, by pushing ourselves at the limit, we can make a new self and a new world?

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1. Montgomery (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marginson (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kivela (2012), p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Giddens (1991); Zhao and Biesta (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sen (2000), p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berlin (1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sen (1985; 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The last of the four stanzas of *Invictus* reads: ‘It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *ibid,* p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the discussion in Dyke (2015), p. 549; Jessop (2005), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Clegg (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Foucault (2005), p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cited in Ball (2017), p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. OECD (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ball, *op cit,* p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *ibid*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *ibid*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Foucault (2005), p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ball, *op cit*, p. xv, p.55 and p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Foucault, *op cit*, p. 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *ibid*, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *ibid*, p. 37, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *ibid*, pp. 70-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Foucault (2011), p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ball, *op cit,* p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Foucault (2011), p. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Foucault (2005), p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Zhao and Biesta, *op cit*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Zhao and Deng (2016), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Zhao and Biesta, *op cit*, p. 9, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Yang (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Tu (2013), p. 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Tu (1996), pp. 59-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Zhao and Deng, *op cit*, pp. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Li (2003), p. 263. See also Hayhoe (2017), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Li, *op cit*, pp. 261-262. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *ibid*, p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Shostya (2015), p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Taylor (2016), p. 3; Sijander and Sutin (2012), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Biesta (2002), p. 345; Foucault (2010), p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Kivela (2012), pp. 59-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Taylor, *op cit*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Kivela, *op cit*, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Kirby and van der Wende (2016), pp. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Sijander and Sutinen, *op cit*, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Sijander (2012), p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *ibid*, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Sijander and Sutinen, *op cit*, pp. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Taylor, *op cit,* p. 3 and p. 7; Biesta, *op cit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Sijander and Sutinen, *op cit*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Kivela, Sijander and Sutinen (2012), p. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Vakeva (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Kivela, Sijander and Sutinen, *op cit,* p. 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Pikkarainen (2012), p. 21. Kant: ‘One of the greatest problems of education is how to unite submission to the necessary restraint with the child’s capability of exercising his free will – for restraint is necessary. How am I to develop the sense of freedom in spite of the restraint? I am to accustom my person to endure a restraint on his freedom, and at the same time I am to guide him to use his freedom aright. Without this all education is merely mechanical, and the child, when his education is over, will never be able to make a possible use of his freedom.’ See Kivela, *op cit*, p. 66. Kant saw it as essential to acknowledge the freedom of the child from the beginning, while also showing the child that the exercise of the child’s own freedom depended on the child supporting the freedom of others. *ibid*, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ashwin (2014), p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Bernstein (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ashwin, *op cit*, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ashwin, *op cit*, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2014), pp. 224-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *ibid*, p. 222; Dubet (2000), p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ashwin, Abbas and McLean, *op cit,* p. 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ashwin and McVitty (undated), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Zhao and Biesta, *op cit*, pp. 6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. e.g. Vygotsky (1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Vygotsky (1986), p. 36; Vygotsky (1978), p. 57. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Sijander and Sutinen, *op cit*, p. 6, p. 11, p. 16; Biesta (2012), p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Kettle (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Kivela, *op cit*, p. 59. See also Kontio (2012), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Kivela, *op cit*, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Von Humboldt, who makes the individual the focal point, is one whose take on Bildung appears lopsided. Konrad (2012), p. 120. At times the American pragmatists are clearer about the reciprocity. For Dewey the terms ‘social’ and ‘individual’ are ‘hopelessly ambiguous’, but only when they are placed in antithesis Dewey (1927), p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. For example, Taylor, *op cit*, pp. 13-14; Zhao and Biesta, *op cit*, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *ibid,* p. 11; Sun (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Chai (2016), p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2015), p. 610. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *op cit*, p. 619. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Aswin and McVitty (undated), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Trendence Research (2017). The study was financed by a consortium of UK student unions. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Studies of student motivation often find that the consumption perspective is present but not dominant. For example, in relation to study abroad, Jaeger and Gram (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. See, for students in the UK, Tomlinson (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Klemencic (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)