4. Higher education as student self-formation

Simon Marginson

INTRODUCTION

It is often said that the most important contribution of higher education is the education of students. Such a statement may seem student-centred, but in most cases it is not. The same contribution of higher education is often described more mechanically as ‘the production of graduates’ or the ‘formation of students’. Students are seen as objects, as an other, in a process executed by educators or institutions who are the subjects. The outcomes, the graduates-as-object, are judged according to what they can do when used by someone else. Graduates are not judged by what they are, or what they can do for themselves.

What graduates can do for others is sometimes imagined as ‘graduate attributes’. These are seen as portable competences that students acquire. Graduates can put them on and off, and display them, like a cloak. This notion of portable attributes owes something to the human capital idea. There is a grain of truth in it but only a grain. Graduates do carry something with them everywhere, and it augments them, but not in the way human capital theory imagines, as an average market price of their labour – a supposed graduate attribute that suddenly vanishes when the labour market collapses. The contribution of higher education to students is not like a cloak. It is more like a skin, or perhaps it is deeper.

At best higher education enables people to transform themselves through the never-ending ‘work of the self on the self’. This was how Michel Foucault (2005, p. 16) described self-formation. In his last three years of lectures he went back to Greece and Rome to study how the ancients made their freedoms – how the Stoics, Epicureans and Cynics learned so brilliantly to form themselves as autonomous beings, using regimes of practice. This is what higher education does in the contemporary world. It helps people to form themselves, though few students have a focus as determined as the Stoics and the Cynics. Perhaps higher education is most transformative for doctoral students. In their
sustained projects they often enter closely into their own intellectuality and develop deeply reflexive trajectories. However, all students can grow themselves in higher education if they want.

**Components of Self-Formation**

This chapter will argue that, all going well, higher education is a reflexive process of self-formation that establishes, or deepens, ongoing self-making, grounded in self-aware agency, that continues through life. Higher education as self-formation is empowering. It is a freedom without limit. The integral elements of higher education as self-formation are the autonomy of the learner, the will to learn, reflexive agency, and immersion in knowledge.

*Autonomy:* Self-formation begins with autonomous persons with agency freedom, capable of self-directed and conscious action, who apply their will to their own objectives.

*The will to learn:* Higher education as self-formation rests on the irreducible fact that while learning is conditioned by external factors, by the learner’s background and resources, by the shape of the higher education system and its intersections with other social sites, and by the institution, curriculum, and teaching and learning resources, only the learner does the learning. The learner is not an empty vessel waiting to be filled. The learner is a person with a will, agency, a drive to learn. Otherwise, no learning occurs. Though the drive to learn can be triggered extrinsically, by the discipline of parents, the example of peers, the inspiration of teachers or the requirements of professional credentialling, there is an irreducible moment when the learner makes self-formation an intrinsic process.

*Reflexive agency:* Each person’s evolving sense of self and objectives, the ‘who I am’, ‘who I am becoming’ and ‘what I want to be’, is sustained by conscious reflexive agency in the inner self, the continuing processes of critical self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-criticism and self-regulation. Reflexive agency is at the heart of not just progress in education but forming ideas, making things, building relations and achieving a career.

*Immersion in knowledge:* In higher education people develop themselves primarily (though not only) by working on themselves amid immersion in knowledge. The factor of knowledge, which is a collective property and a medium which engages students in social relations, distinguishes self-formation in higher education from self-making in other contexts. Immersion in knowledge expands the techniques and resources for working on oneself, offering an open potential for transformation, for knowledge has no borders. Self-transformation in higher education is enriched by sharing it with others, inside and outside the classroom. The curricular and extracurricular
knowledge absorbed by students become part of their reflexive sense of self and their conversation with themselves and others.

Self-formation is a condition of higher education, its central process and its most important outcome. The capacity for self-formation begins in people very early (Vygotsky, 1978). The conscious will to learn can emerge prior to adolescence (Li, 2012), though the extent to which there is self-aware reflexive agency at the beginning of higher education varies between persons. Higher education is a concentrated period of self-formation within the life-course, during which agency freedom and conscious reflexivity have the opportunity to flourish, and the person’s sense of self and social relations are permeated by specific knowledges. Will-directed making of oneself accumulates throughout the rest of life.

Self-formation in higher education has many contemporary parallels. Political democracy, mass education and borderless markets all bring the self-critical reflexive self to the front. Consider consumption, fashion, body management and wellness, the fascination with political identity. Anthony Giddens (1991) describes modern life as a never-ending reflexive project of the self (p. 32). No doubt self-formation in higher education is one of the conditions for the worldwide normalisation of the reflexive self, as well as vice versa.

The Chapter

The idea of higher education as self-formation discussed in this chapter arose from research on international education, including 270 semi-structured interviews (Marginson et al., 2010) that identified reflexive agency in international students (Marginson, 2014). The 2014 paper led to empirical studies by other scholars, including Tran (2016) and Oldac (2021) on international students, and Lee (in process) on academic self-formation. Following an earlier lecture (Marginson, 2018) the chapter extends the idea of self-formation from international education to higher education as a whole. The chapter expands on higher education as self-formation, starting from agency freedom, the reflexive inner self with a will. It draws on theorisations and empirical studies which explore reflexive agency in general and in higher education, including agency immersed in knowledge. It takes material from social theory, educational philosophy past and present, research in psychology and studies of higher education. The chapter primarily works with theory and concepts and is itself a theorisation.

Some will find the mix of ideas, from Foucault to Lev Vygotsky to Confucius to John Dewey to contemporary psychology, unacceptably eclectic. The material is held together by the focus on reflexive student agency. Not all
of the thinkers discussed here consistently position the self-forming agent at the centre, but all of them help us to understand this.

**AUTONOMY, AGENCY AND REFLEXIVITY IN SOCIAL THEORY**

Social theory discusses elements of self-formation including autonomy, will-bearing agency and reflexivity. Scholars vary in their judgements of the scope for autonomous agency, in the context of structural factors like economic inequality, social hierarchy and inherited culture.

Amartya Sen (1985) identifies three components of freedom. First, the freedom of the individual from external threat, coercion or constraint. Sen calls this ‘control freedom’. Second, freedom as the capacity to act. Sen calls this ‘freedom as power’, and later (Sen, 1992), ‘effective freedom’. Third, there is ‘agency freedom’, the centring component, the seat of the autonomous human will and self-directed conscious action. ‘A person’s “agency freedom” refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important’ (Sen, 1985, p. 203), ‘whether or not’ we assess those goals ‘in terms of some external criteria as well’. Agency freedom may take in family, friends, commitments, status, dignity, making things, satisfying work and the scope to realise forms of life. It can include shared collective as well as individual goods. It is about determining one’s own life, though under conditions one does not fully control.

Agency freedom is secured when people have the ‘capabilities’ to lead the life they value. Capabilities ‘depend on the nature of the social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms’ (Sen, 1999, p. 288), including income, education and health.

**Margaret Archer and the Inner Conversation**

For Margaret Archer (1995), the key problem is relations between structure and agency. ‘Structure’ includes material resources and also ‘ideational’ culture, including language, knowledge and information. There is also human society. ‘Society takes shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities’ (p. 5). Outlining her ‘morphogenetic approach’, Archer describes a continuing interplay between the elements external to the self and the agency freedom of individuals. ‘We are simultaneously free and constructed and we also have some awareness of it’ (p. 2).

While structure and agency both have causal powers and can affect each other, causality is not exercised automatically or instrumentally. Archer starts from what she calls social realism, a cousin of critical realism (e.g.
Sayer, 2000), which sees the world as ontologically open and multiple.1 In this worldview, as was discussed in Chapter 2, neither structure nor agency is ‘immutable’, fixed. Archer (1995) identifies an ‘analytical dualism’ in which structure and agency constitute different levels of a stratified social reality. Both structure and agency are emergent. Relations between them are always open and neither determines the other. ‘The human being is neither pre-given nor socially constructed’ (Archer, 2000, p. 50). They do not continually constitute each other, as suggested by Giddens and Bourdieu; nor are they symmetrical in relation to each other, or combined in a dialectic, which would again suggest identity. ‘Each possess autonomous emergent properties which are thus capable of independent variation and therefore of being out of phase with one another over time’ (Archer, 1995, p. 66). They are heterogeneous.

Structures pre-exist people. People do not create structures, they can only reproduce or transform them (Archer, 1995, p. 72). However, ‘people are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties’ (p. 71). ‘People are capable of resisting, repudiating, suspending or circumventing structural and cultural tendencies, in ways which are unpredictable because of their creative powers as human beings’ (p. 195). ‘Agency … can speed up, delay or prevent the elimination of prior structural influences’ (p. 78).

The point is that there is much scope for autonomous agency. This includes collective as well as individual agency. ‘The causal powers proper to agency itself … are the powers which ultimately enable people to reflect on their social context, and to act reflexively towards it, either individually or collectively’ (Archer, 2000, p. 308). However, ‘agential powers are always conditioned though not determined, by the socio-cultural context in which people live’. This ‘regulatory mechanism’ is affected by agents’ responses to their conditions, their economic and cultural resources, and their positioning in society which determines the available social identities (Archer, 2000, pp. 269, 10; Archer, 2003, p. 131). One sign of the autonomy and potential heterogeneity of agency is that different people can have varied responses to common external conditions (Archer, 1995, p. 70).

Archer’s theorisation also discusses the inner mental life of agents, and their reflexivity. She distinguishes between the continuous sense of self, the bearer of expectations and responsibilities – which she says is universal to the human condition, citing Marcel Mauss in support – and variable social identity (Archer, 1995, pp. 282–283). Our self-consciousness as persons develops out of ‘the ways we are biologically constituted, the way the world is, and

---

1 In her study of the inner conversation Archer opens Pandora’s box, ontologically speaking: ‘Reality itself is not homogenous; rather it is made up of entities whose own constituents are radically different from one another’ (Archer, 2003, p. 35).
Assessing the contributions of higher education

from the necessity of our human interaction with the external environment’ (Archer, 2000, p. 50). It ‘emerges early in life and is the source of reflexive self-consciousness which lasts throughout life – continually informing us that the things which happen to us ourselves and the things we make happen, all pertain to the self-same thing’ (p. 255).

Archer repeatedly emphasises ‘the relative autonomy, pre-existence and causal efficacy of human persons in relation to social selves’ (Archer, 1995, p. 285). This autonomy enables the ‘private consciousness’, which she also calls the ‘synthesizing self’, to ‘reflect upon’ the social or public self (p. 292). In ‘this rich inner life of reflection upon reality’, this ‘inner conversation’ with ourselves, we give shape to our lives (Archer, 2000, pp. 9–10). Because we have ‘that prime human power, our self-consciousness … we are reflexive beings, to know oneself to be the same being over time, means that one can think about it’ (p. 8).

Self-reflection is an emergent power, ‘neither pre-given nor the gift of society’ but continually formed in practice, through living actively in the world (Archer, 2000, p. 8). Archer’s focus on ‘practice’ as a source of mentality, learned agential responsiveness to the external settings, is paralleled by Dewey’s (1916) trope of ‘experience’, and the argument of Biesta and Tedder (2007). But it is reflexivity that is key. The inner conversation is ‘the missing link between structure and agency’ (Archer, 2003, back cover). It is ‘the mode of articulation between people and reality’ (Archer, 2000, p. 306). The inner conversation ‘enjoys its own relative autonomy, temporal priority and causal efficacy’ (p. 193). Here we define ourselves, accumulate self-knowledge, review our evolving commitments, sort our priorities, reflect on the external world as an object, and weigh our actions in relation to external factors affecting our interests (Archer, 2000, pp. 11–12, 201, 298, 300, 318).


Autonomous agency and reflexivity entails work. ‘Self-knowledge is something that we produce internally and dialogically; it is not something that we discover “lying inside us”’ (Archer, 2003, p. 103). The individual is ‘an active subject in shaping his or her own life’ (p. 116). She or he fashions projects, including the self as a project, as Giddens suggests:

At any given time, the future will seem open, which accounts for our sense of freedom, but it is being made in the present by the projects that we discursively endorse and the activities in which we engage accordingly. Of course, in an open
system, future contingencies can intervene to disrupt and distort such a trajectory. Nevertheless, the fact that we are made as we are as human beings and self-made as persons, who have acquired a personal identity, means that we are also and necessarily project makers. (Archer, 2003, p. 115)

In addition to the central points that education is facilitated by, and a facilitator of, personal reflexivity; and education, especially knowledge, is a source of cultural resources for self-making; Archer’s work has another implication for higher education. Because the world, including the social world, is an open system, and because we have a personal identity and an inner conversation, we are not exhaustively formed by socialisation (Archer, 2000, p. 221). This sets limits on the scope of other-formation in education. As noted, teaching needs to enlist the self-forming inner conversation as an ally, if it is to be effective.

**Michel Foucault and the Autonomous Will**

Michel Foucault studies human subjects in relations of power. He has a lifelong concern about control freedom in Sen’s sense, freedom from determination by the state, but his work moves from a focus on the constraints on freedom, to methods of expanding it.

Foucault’s mid-career work on power-knowledge emphasises how we are controlled and self-regulated. He dissects disciplinary projects of states such as the prison and the school and the regimes of truth associated with them (Foucault, 1975). The work on ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1991) expands on agency freedom within disciplinary regimes. Relations of power are decentralised in micro-capillaries running through society, in which the autonomous power of subjects is shaped by external agendas. The will itself is captured.

In his last three years before his death at 57, however, Foucault moves to what Archer (2000) calls ‘the late foucauldian project of self-formation and self-enrichment’ (p. 34). He introduces ‘a more robust self-concept’ (p. 19). In his own words there is a ‘theoretical displacement’ away from the conflation of power-knowledge to ‘the relation of self to self and the constitution of oneself as a subject’ (p. 33). Instead of showing how individual freedom is normally controlled, he focuses on how to separate it from control altogether.

For Foucault, unlike Sen, freedom lies not so much in changing external conditions to expand the scope for agency, but in directly changing oneself as agent (Foucault, 2005, p. 251). The self, he states, is the only condition over which we have full control — the only object we can freely will ‘without having to take into consideration external determinations’ (p. 133). This recalls Archer’s point about the heterogeneity of structure and agency, but pushes beyond it to explore how individual autonomy is enhanced. People are more free than they know, states Foucault. They do not make full use of their poten-
Assessing the contributions of higher education

tial (Ball, 2017, pp. xv, 55, 61). The key is the development of the autonomous free will through disciplined personal regimes of self-making, through knowledge and technique. As Biesta and Tedder (2007) state, agency is ‘something that is achieved, rather than possessed’ (p. 132).

Foucault shows that autonomous self-formation is feasible because it has been done before. He describes the practical philosophies of the Greeks and Romans that were focused on autonomous self-making, prior to Christianity: meditation, self-examination rituals, rules of ethical conduct, truth telling (parrhesia), and the forms of the ‘other life’ of the Stoics and Cynics. In these practices the Hellenic world was more advanced than us. While ‘the theme of return to the self’ has recurred in modern culture, ‘I do not think we have anything to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self’ (Foucault, 2005, p. 251).

For Foucault ‘freedom is the capacity and opportunity to participate in one’s self-formation’ (Ball, 2017, p. 69). But this is 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’ (Foucault, 2005, p. 16). This brings reflexivity to the centre. For the Greeks and Romans, reflexive self-criticism always involves something different, something ‘other’. There were two main modes of reflexivity. The Platonists had the ‘other world’, an imagined ideal world against which this world could be critically judged. For the Cynics, if a human life was truly a life of truth, ‘must it not be an other life, a life which is radically and paradoxically other?’ (Foucault, 2011, p. 245). The Cynics were the most successful in achieving autonomy. They lived distinctive, challenging lives of their own determination, outside the normal, concentrating a relentless will in sustaining conduct which scandalised their communities, even to the point of ostracism and death. Foucault’s final conclusion, in the last sentence of the last lecture in the month before his death, is that in autonomous self-formation we open ourselves to transformation, to becoming something different, through the device of the ‘other world’, or by living the ‘other life’ (Ball, 2017, p. 56; Foucault, 2011, p. 340).

Ball (2017) concludes that while education is ‘one of the key sites in which the processes of normalisation are enacted’, as the earlier Foucault showed, it can also be ‘a locus of struggle for productive processes of self-formation and freedom’ (p. 3). Higher education is a place for remaking the self in terms of the other world or the other life. Student activists reimagine the world through the lens of another, better world and practise a prefigurative politics in which they live the ‘other life’. Mobile students are living in the other world, even the other life, in their self-transformation (Marginson, 2014).

There are differences between Sen, Archer and Foucault. Sen is the most deductive, wanting to free agency through structural change. Foucault’s logic is primarily inductive. His individuals can separate themselves from their
Higher education as student self-formation

Agency is socially defined but might be an other to society. Archer takes a middle position, identifying heterogeneous causality in both directions. Nevertheless, all agree on the centrality of autonomous agency freedom, and that it is partly decoupled from structure. Archer has the most to say about reflexivity. It is also central to Foucault. Foucault takes furthest the work of the self on the self, which is articulated through learned knowledge and technique, as in higher education.

REFLEXIVE AGENCY IN EMPIRICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Vygotsky’s Social Psychology

Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) empirical research in the social psychology of child development traces the evolution of reflexive agency. Proactive agency is hard-wired into the infant, like the desire for food, but the emergence of the sense of self, the inner conversation and reflexivity pass through the loop of encounters with others, in speech community.

The infant reaches out, smiles and draws adults into speech exchange, first with noises and then with words. In language, which is both shared and individualisable, the child establishes socially recognised identity and capability, while her/his mentality is patterned. Thus children learn to work with and on their own minds. ‘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’ (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 36, emphasis in original; Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). It can be argued that immersion in knowledge in higher education lifts this process to a new level.

In criticising Vygotsky, Archer (1995) states that ‘our humanity is prior to our sociality and … social identity is emergent from personal identity’ (p. 284). Cognitive powers are prelinguistic (Archer, 2000, p. 103). The capacity to differentiate social objects is derived from a prior capacity in making distinctions (Archer, 1995, p. 286). Yet Archer and Vygotsky are not as far apart as Archer suggests. Vygotsky’s process begins and ends with individuals. There are limits to the capacity of pre-cultural infants, with their raw agential power, to talk with themselves without socially formed language from the common store. As Archer herself argues, the inner conversation arises in the distinction between personal and social self. The self is double-coded: individual agency is always socially separated and socially embedded.

For Vygotsky human behaviour is not simply called forth by external stimuli, nor solely governed from within (Bakhurst, 2009, p. 199). It is also mediated by externalised artefacts that prompt or modulate action – artefacts
Assessing the contributions of higher education accessed or modified by humans to change the potentials of the self. These artefacts take two primary forms: tools used to transform the natural world, and ‘internally oriented’ signs, ‘a means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). These signs include ‘language, various systems for counting, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbol systems, works of art, writing, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings’ (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137). Knowledge and the curriculum can be added. Signs are deliberately deployed as externalised regulators to pattern the inner self. Vygotsky repeatedly emphasises the role of mediation in reflexive human agency.

The individual actively modified the stimulus situation as part of the process of responding to it. Because this auxiliary stimulus possesses the specific function of reverse action, it transfers the psychological operation to higher and qualitatively new forms and permits humans, by the aid of extrinsic stimuli, to control their behaviour from the outside. (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 14 and 40)

Contemporary strands of empirical psychology also bear on reflexive agency, including cognitive load theory and executive functions research (e.g. Diamond, 2013). Relevant terms include ‘self-efficacy’ and ‘proactiveness’. Self-determination theory and social cognitive theory, especially, have advanced the discussion.

Self-Determination Theory

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci use laboratory experiments and applied research to investigate self-determination, which entails will-directed autonomy under conditions of agency freedom. They identify universal desires for autonomy, competence and engagement. People are ‘curious, vital and self-motivated’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 68):

At their best they are agentic and inspired, striving to learn; extend themselves; master new skills; and apply their talents responsibly. … That most people show considerable effort, agency, and commitment in their lives appears, in fact, to be more normative than exceptional, suggesting some very positive and persisting features in human nature. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68)

People behave as they do not simply in response to external stimuli but because activities are interesting and enjoyable. Self-determination theory focuses on their ‘inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68), though the drive for self-determination is not fixed, it is accumulative and emergent. People develop capabilities and potentialities that extend the self, and engage in ‘synthesis, organisation, or relative unity of both
Higher education as student self-formation

knowledge and personality’, thereby achieving ‘a coherent sense of self’ (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 3). They achieve greater capacities for self-regulation and integrity over time. They align what they learn with who they are in a reflexive process. Studies apply the self-determination idea to students’ motivations and behaviours in higher education (e.g. Black & Deci, 2000; Kusurkar et al., 2013; Levesque et al., 2004).

For Ryan and Deci (2000) self-determination can flourish only ‘if circumstances permit’ (p. 70). Social arrangements can either facilitate or impede agency, though contextual impacts are conditioning, not determining. Ryan and Deci find that changing environments can stimulate self-consciousness. They also highlight adaptation by the unconscious as well as the conscious mind. External changes foster intrinsic motivation when they enable competence, relatedness and autonomy, provided that basic psychological needs are met, like a sense of belonging. Extrinsic drivers become ‘internalised’ into the self, meaning ‘taking in a value or regulation’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). When regulation aligns with personal needs and values it is ‘integrated’ as a motivation intrinsic to the sense of self. Here the model of outer-to-inner causality seems linear, missing Archer’s insight into the open, fluctuating, uneven reciprocity between structure and agency in self-formation.

In self-determination theory internalisation and integration engage conscious agency, especially integration (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). Agency is further facilitated when people have experiences of self-efficacy. The role given to basic needs and the unconscious seems to weaken focus on the inner conversation, the deliberative will and the work of the self on the self. It also pulls self-determination towards psychology’s idea of equilibrium and away from projects of the other world or other life, such as immersion in unfamiliar knowledges, or crossing geographical and linguistic-cultural borders to acquire education. However, Ryan and Deci (2002) do find that people ‘seek and engage challenges in their environments’ in seeking to realise the desired self (p. 8). As Bandura (2018) also argues, individuals can self-determine not only by reducing ‘discrepancy’ in their lives but by producing discrepancy.

Social Cognitive Theory

In Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory, agency is central and ‘the most distinctive human characteristic is the capability for reflective self-consciousness’ (Bandura, 1986, p. 21). As in Archer, human activity is determined by a combination of personal factors, social relations and environmental factors. In contrast with psychological theories in which behaviour is decontextualised and habitual, social cognitive theory understands activity to be ‘socially situated, discriminatively contextualised, and conditionally manifested’ (Bandura,
Assessing the contributions of higher education

2018, p. 134) with scope to alter both one’s inner (especially) and outer circumstances.

Bandura (2001) emphasises ‘intentionality’. He finds that agency has three primary aspects: forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2018, p. 130). ‘Forethought’ refers to the fact that people plan and adopt goals. ‘Self-reactiveness’ means regulating one’s behaviour according to self-chosen standards. ‘Self-reflective’ people are ‘self-examiners of their functioning’. They consider ‘their efficacy to realize given challenges’, the soundness of thoughts and actions, ‘their values, and the meaning and morality of their pursuits’. They ‘address conflicts between alternative courses of action and competing values and favour one course over another’. The ‘metacognitive capability’ of self-reflectiveness is ‘the most distinctly human core property of agency’ (p. 131).

The exercise of agency rests on the confidence that one has the capability to achieve one’s objectives. This essential self-belief is affected by cognitive, motivational, affective processes, and by attitudes to risk (Bandura, 1993). It is ‘the foundation of human aspiration, motivation and accomplishments’. Self-belief determines the type of goals people set for themselves, their expectation of outcomes, the strength of their commitment to their goals, and how they interpret conditions, obstacles and challenges (Bandura, 2002; Bandura, 2018, p. 133). Hence ‘freedom is expanded by installing affirmative self-beliefs and altering self-impending internal standards’ (Bandura, 1986, p. 41).

Bandura extends agency beyond ‘spheres of activity that are personably controllable’, to include ‘proxy agency’ exercised by other persons or institutions on their behalf – triggered by individuals, but conditioned by factors beyond their control – and ‘collective agency’, achieving goals by working together, pooling ‘knowledge, skills and resources’ (Bandura, 2018, p. 131), a point of intersection with Archer (2000, Part IV). Bandura emphasises that ‘agentic factors’ can be modified, and this constitutes a basis for ‘effecting individual and social change’ (2018, p. 134). Communication technologies expand the scope for individual and collective agency (2018, p. 134). So does education, in fostering self-formation: ‘a major goal of formal education should be to equip students with the intellectual tools, self-beliefs and self-regulatory capabilities to educate themselves throughout their lifetimes’ (Bandura, 1993, p. 136). Bandura also advocates large-scale community programmes designed to achieve social change by the top-down fostering of moral self-regulation.

PROTOTYPES OF SELF-FORMATION IN EDUCATION

There are roots of higher education as self-formation at both ends of Eurasia, and in North America. Autonomy, reflexive agency, the will to learn and
knowledge are present, though learning is often understood as other-formation. There are some differences between the Anglo-European and Chinese civilizational traditions, which diverge in their various configurations of individual/society (Marginson & Yang, 2022; see also Chapter 7).

**Confucian Self-Cultivation and the Will to Learn**

Weiming Tu (2013) states that ‘the great strength of modern East Asia is its … self-definition as a learning civilization’. This is ‘the most precious legacy of Confucian humanism’ (p. 334). For Guoping Zhao and Zongyi Deng (2016), ‘person-making is at the heart of the Confucian heritage of educational thinking’. In this heritage ‘it has long been held that self-cultivation is the precondition for developing ‘the critical and creative potential of the individual and enabling him or her to fulfil social responsibilities and functions’ (pp. 2–3). Zhao and Biesta (2011) state that the Confucian self is not a finished entity but is always becoming. The Confucian learner is engaged in a continuing and never finished process of self-perfection (p. 13), not just in formal education but in social relations (p. 3). Self-perfection includes how to conduct oneself. ‘Confucianism presents a view of identity and the self that is explicitly informed by moral and ethical dimensions’ (p. 9).

In Confucian tradition ‘learning is the most important thing in life, it is life’s purpose’ (Li, 2012, p. 14). Knowledge is essential not so much as a source of utilitarian benefits, though these are important, but as a means of self-cultivation in the journey towards perfection. Knowledge is an artefact in Vygotsky’s sense, a medium for working on oneself in the reflexive processes of self-monitoring, self-criticism and improvement. Both breadth and depth of knowledge are important. The Chinese civilisational approach also emphasises the contribution of knowledge to society (Hayhoe & Liu, 2010; Li, 2003, p. 265).

Education is seen as potentially universal to the population, as argued by Mencius. Though individual abilities are unevenly distributed, all can learn and succeed through hard work. The drive to learn is inculcated from a very early age. ‘The starting point for Chinese people’s learning affect is establishing one’s will (lizhi), commitment to learning’ (Li, 2012, p. 163) with the whole ‘heart and mind’ (p. 164), often by the age of six or seven years and primarily in the home not the school. Young children learn that ‘seeking knowledge requires resolve, diligence, endurance of hardship, steadfastness, concentration, and humility’ (p. 14). The concept of hao-xue-xin (passion for learning) becomes well understood by nearly all Chinese learners. Li (2003) finds that when compared to US college students, Chinese students exhibit a stronger ‘directive force’ in relation to learning tasks (pp. 258, 261–262).
‘Autonomy and personal agency’ are integral to Sinic learning (Li, 2012, p. 132). The Confucian Analects establish a clear space for the individual in moral self-cultivation. Li (2006, p. 483) cites Saari (1990), in whose studies Chinese children ‘developed an “inner self” in order to retain a private space of their own’, as Archer suggests. But the autonomous individual is firmly contained in society. She/he is nested in the successively larger settings of family, local community, state/society and tianxia, all under heaven, as discussed in Chapter 7. The Sinic term ren (loosely, ‘humanity’) is at the heart of Sinic self-formation and ren exists in relationships. Ren combines the words for ‘two’ and ‘human being’.

For Qi Sun (2008) the Confucian view of self has three aspects: the ‘I’ undivided with the universe, the ‘I’ in unity with other humans and the wholeness of ‘I’ with self that enables the reflexive work of self on self (Zhao & Biesta, 2011, p. 11). Education requires reflexivity in relation to each of these relationships. There is direct, unrefracted reflexivity, the work of self on self. There is also reflexivity that is refracted, in two ways: via personal relationships, and via engagement in the world as a whole, tianxia, which in its largest sense embodies a commitment to the good of all, the global common good (Zhao, 2021).

This commitment includes passing on one’s learning: the more one learns, the more one can contribute to others by teaching. Self-cultivation in higher education also serves the state. The Imperial Dynasties channelled self-cultivation into training in official academies and selection for the state bureaucracy. Confucianism places more emphasis on effective freedom and agency freedom than on freedom as control, which is the main aspect of freedom discussed in Euro-American countries, where independence from the state is a central trope (see Chapter 7). The state is more favourably viewed in East Asia. This is not to say that autonomous freedom or individuality are diminished. Rather, the individual is positioned in a different manner in relation to the social. (The idea of state and individual as zero-sum in relations of power is itself a Western idea.) Perhaps more than Archer, Confucianism distinguishes between free will, zhi, the inner self of moral autonomy, and the outer social self. Persons must refrain from enacting their will if there are negative social consequences. Self-determination is absolute but self-realisation is not. Practising free will is not seen as an absolute right but as a good thing among good things (Chan, 2013).

As in Imperial times, higher education is a source of status. ‘Ideas regarding status do not contradict seeking self-perfection and contributing to society because learning is seen not only as an individual process but also as a social process’ (Li, 2003, p. 264). However, much depends on the social values in which self-cultivation is nested. Zhao and Deng (2016) ask whether universities in China have retained the classical commitment to holistic person-forming
or have collapsed into economic utility and credentials not learning content (pp. 2–3). Rui Yang (2017) makes a similar point. Parallel questions arise in Euro-America.

**Bildung, Kant and Self-Liberation**

The closest Euro-American equivalent to Confucian learning is the Enlightenment philosophy of Bildung. One translation of the German ‘Bildung’ is ‘self-formation’. Others are ‘development’ and ‘inner cultivation’ (Siljander & Sutinen, 2012, p. 2; Taylor, 2017, p. 421). Self-formation in Kant’s idea of Enlightenment is ‘man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage through the exercise of his own understanding … without direction from another’ (Kant, 1784/1992, p. 90). In Bildung individual autonomy is both the medium and means of the development of the person and a prized outcome of the process.

**Bildung** does not occur by itself. Kant sees education as ‘the crucial element for evolving humanity, which takes its place in every individual, but also on the collective level’ (Kivela, 2012, pp. 59–60). Through education humans develop their ‘rational capacities so that they became capable of independent judgment’, which is ‘the basis for agentic and autonomous action’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 133). The Kantian aim of education is an active autonomous rational subject who ‘lives in the public sphere among other individual beings’ and uses reason in a public way (Kivela, 2012, p. 59). Education forms citizens for emergent civil society (Biesta, 2002a, p. 345). Through particular knowledge in local settings, students come to understand the general and enduring (Biesta, 2002b, p. 379). The universal curriculum of Bildung also promises escape from the limiting effects of social background.

**Bildung** resembles Confucian self-cultivation as a holistic project in which systematic learning practices and learned reflexivity are joined to a strong moral dimension. Kant notes the paradox in forming learners to form themselves – how can we cultivate freedom by coercion? (Kivela, 2012, p. 68) – though the dilemma is reduced at higher education stage. In contrast with Confucianism, in Bildung agency freedom is prior to society (Taylor, 2017, p. 423); and society is civil society, not the state. Kant wants people to learn to think independently without guidance from the authorities (Kivela, 2012, p. 59). Bildung promises liberation from power structures, a meaning endorsed by Foucault (2010) in his commentary on Kant (p. 26). Foucault’s work of the self on the self resonates with Bildung, as he notes (Foucault, 2005, p. 61). It also coincides with Confucian self-cultivation, which he does not mention.

Nevertheless, as with Confucianism in China, the original self-formation in Bildung was turned to nation-building and the education of the national elite. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s blueprint for the University of Berlin was a formative curriculum broad and deep, grounded in history, classical languages and
Assessing the contributions of higher education

literature, linguistics, science and research. Von Humboldt also placed the university wholly at the service of the state, albeit with institutional autonomy and the freedom to learn and to teach. Across the world academics defend their control freedom by invoking the Humboldtian university (Siljander & Sutinen, 2012, p. 15); though with less attention to Lernfreiheit, the agency freedom of the self-forming student.

Like the Confucian idea Bildung implies a process of becoming, and the open-ended evolution of human potential, in which perfection is never achieved, rather than static measures of skills and knowledge. Teaching and learning cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of cause and effect. Bildung opens new horizons as it proceeds, there is an ‘an open independent space’ separate from teaching and the educability of the self-forming learner continually expands (Siljander, 2012, pp. 94, 96). Bildung’s vision of educational subjects who are shaped by context but have agency, and develop themselves while taking educated citizenship to the world, retains influence, though contemporary advocates emphasise, more than before, practices that respect difference and diversity (Taylor, 2017).

**Dewey and the Pragmatists**

The American pragmatists, including John Dewey and G.H. Mead, agreed with exponents of Bildung that education’s purpose was the formation of the free autonomous self and this would contribute to social formation. Arguably Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* (1916) is a theory of Bildung, especially where he explores self-discipline. The pragmatists gave self-formation their own twist. Their category was ‘growth’. They saw education as proceeding via inquiry and experience, in natural and cultural environments, through shared language, learned reflexivity and harmony with the environmental settings (Vakeva, 2012). Learning in experience and nature, and lifelong growth, also resonate with the Confucian tradition.

Mead like Vygotsky sees individual self-formation as taking place within social exchange via language. Individuals create shared meanings or solve problems, triggering reflection (Biesta, 2012, p. 248; Siljander & Sutinen, 2012, pp. 6, 11, 16). Mead’s conception of the self is critiqued by Archer (2003) as ‘over-social’ in that the truly private domain is emptied out from the inner conversation (pp. 78–92). It seems more plausible to argue that both self-to-social-to-self and self-to-self reflexivities are possible, and the role of language can vary. Kettle’s (2005) interview subject, a Thai student in Australia, believed his effective agency did not exist until he learned to communicate and interact effectively with local persons.

The three prototypes incorporate most but not all of higher education as self-formation. Each of Confucian learning, Bildung and the pragmatists
include immersion in knowledge, autonomous reflexivity and the work of the self on the self. The will to learn is emphasised more strongly in Confucianism than Bildung and pragmatism (Hayhoe, 2017, p. 7; Li, 2003, p. 263). Arguably, all three place insufficient emphasis on autonomous agency, leaving the door open to other-formation. All three schools of thought agree that higher education should be designed in terms of social norms. The weaker notion of autonomy also limits the scope for creative reflexivity. Nevertheless, Bildung’s central goal is autonomous persons, and recent interpretations of pragmatism have partly shifted the balance from teacher activity to self-regulation by the self-forming learner (Kivela et al., 2012, p. 308).

The three traditions differ on the degree to which individual formation is heterogenous in relation to social formation, in Archer’s sense of analytical dualism. The Confucian notion is the most radical in developing the reflexive will, but also the most conservative, in that it is least likely to imagine an emergent individual agency separable from society (Bildung, also, is often seen as contained within social reproduction). Foucault’s idea of a self that regulates its own social embeddedness, from the Cynics, takes learner autonomy further.

HIGHER EDUCATION

People form themselves at work and in community organisations, through social media and other conversation, in consumption, bodybuilding, fitness, diet, personal relations and many other ways. What is distinctive about student self-formation in higher education? Arguably, this lies in three domains. First, it occurs in formal institutions and is conditioned by policy, administration and services as well as classrooms. Second, the role of teaching. Third, student self-formation takes place through immersion in knowledge.

Though there is much research on student learning and engagement, it rarely connects directly to student self-formation. Investigation of self-formation requires fine-grained studies of change over time at the individual level, in which self-consciousness, projects and reflexivity are tracked, the exchange between self and environment is explored, and the open-ended, multiple potentials of self-formation are acknowledged. Most research is not like this. Nevertheless, there are useful insights in various research programmes.

Student Learning and Development

Research on student approaches to learning contrasts deep and surface learning (Biggs, 2011; Entwistle & Ramsden, 2015). Surface learning, for example memorisation strategies, is seen as extrinsically driven. Deep learning is agential. Learners are intrinsically motivated to immerse themselves in contents. They critically examine new knowledge, relate it to previous learning and
monitor themselves during learning. A weakness of the surface/deep dualism (Case & Marshall, 2009) is that surface learning can be agentically driven.

Studies of college student development do incorporate longitudinal perspectives. The student experience is modelled as a developmental journey towards greater autonomy, self-awareness, reflexivity and self-control (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The idea of self-consciousness as part of student development emerged early (Chickering, 1969). Baxter Magolda (2008) positions reflexivity at the centre, as process and outcome. She describes ‘self-authorship’, ‘the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity and social relations’ (p. 269).

The student moves from reliance on external sources for self-definition and decision-making, to internal regulation. For Astin (1984), development is conditioned by institution-provided resources, an influential approach that suggests purchase for strategy. Much of the discussion focuses generically on learning rather than being discipline specific.

Most studies of student development use linear models and look for homogeneous patterns in large groups of learners, thereby enabling large scale data analysis (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students are seen as other-formed by environments, institutions and teaching. Proactive agential responses are underplayed. It is as if common external conditions are expected to trigger predictable and relatively uniform student behaviours. The variety of inner conversations, and the diversity of students’ life projects, shaped by the self-determining students themselves, is missed. The will to learn (‘motivation’) and autonomy itself are seen as implanted from outside, invoking the Kantian paradox, though students in higher education are not children.

**Immersion in Knowledge**

Knowledges are shared property, collective systems of signs, configured like languages. Immersion in knowledge replicates the infant process of self-formation, in which the sense of self is nurtured in speech community, triggering the first self-awareness (Vygotsky, 1978). However, in self-formation in higher education the student engages with knowledge not instinctively but consciously. Ashwin et al. (2014) cite Dubet (2000) who states that ‘students “form” themselves through the meaning they attribute to knowledge’ (p. 222). Like other Vygotskian artefacts, knowledges are both external to persons and deployed by them as an internal regulator through ‘reverse action’. People use knowledge to transform themselves and their capacity to respond to (and perhaps shape) their environments. Knowledge mediates between Archer’s continuous inner self and the wider world.

Disciplines are powerful knowledges. They can transform the inner self and its conversations and build new capabilities in social intervention. Immersion in knowledges provides open-ended tools (knowledge has no limits) for
appropriation of reality, exchange with others and the formation of mediating artefacts. The provision of access to these knowledges is a primary contribution of higher education. Teaching is indispensable because it brings students to the disciplines which are, as Foucault states, forms of the ‘other world’ or the ‘other life’, mediums for the endless creative work of the self on the self.

Students do not know the disciplines until they engage with them in depth. Only teachers know what is needed. Fully self-determining choice within a learning programme not wholly known to the students does not strengthen agentic formation, it undermines it.

The role of knowledge in self-formation cannot be understood in solely generic terms. For Bernstein (2000) the disciplines foster differing kinds of reflexive consciousness that shape ‘who we are, who we think we can become and what we think we can do’ (McLean et al., 2013, p. 265). Maton (2013) argues that some knowledges are abstract and ‘epistemic’ in form; others foreground social values and self-identity. Disciplines, and concepts within them, can also have varying meanings in different cultural contexts. All of these variations modulate the effects of disciplines when they are used as artefacts in self-transformation.

There are numerous studies of learning in specific disciplines. Only one will be mentioned. Research by Ashwin et al. (2014) investigates student learning in sociology. This ‘illustrates the crucial role that students’ relations to knowledge play in understanding the transformative nature of higher education’ (p. 219). The focuses of the study are on what is learned, how the discipline is understood and how students are ‘transformed by higher education’ (p. 231), rather than on how students use higher education to transform themselves. However, the research uses a longitudinal approach and unearths findings that are suggestive in relation to self-formation. The students’ accounts of sociology change over time. Their growing reflexivity in relation to the discipline is apparent, and they become more confident in their accounts of the world via the medium of the discipline.

Students move from seeing sociology as issues or topics separated from themselves; to a relational whole that constitutes a way of understanding the world and includes the learner; to a partial relational whole that provides different ways to understand the world and includes the learner (Ashwin et al., 2014, pp. 224–229). The student joins to the discipline with an abstract sense of it and moves to a nuanced understanding of specific ways it can change the self. As one interviewee puts it: ‘It [sociology] does a good job to create the awareness that you may need to develop on further or to continue building on’ (p. 227). The study also shows that some students do not immerse themselves in sociological knowledge, others do but then disinvest (e.g. p. 229), and the majority of those interviewed stop short of full self-transformation. ‘Students’ engagement with knowledge is not a sufficient condition for this transforma-
Assessing the contributions of higher education

tion and ... there also needs to be an alignment between students’ personal projects and the focus of disciplinary knowledge’ (p. 231).

Active subjects who shape their lives are ‘project makers’ (Archer, 2003, pp. 115–116). The task of teachers and institutions is not just to provide resources but to persuade students to join their project making – including themselves as project – to the curriculum.

Projects and Modes of Self-Formation

Higher education is open-ended growth in which the ultimate outcomes are largely hidden. Most self-formation does not involve deliberative planning and is an end in itself. There are many ways that students expand themselves beyond the classroom, multiple projects with heterogeneous values (Klemencic, 2015). Some engage intensively in cultural activity, or social activism, or student politics or global problems. Many are ‘finding themselves’ in the student years, which suggests advanced and intensive reflexivity (Marginson, 2014). Self-making can constitute any and all of immediate gratification, identity or self-investment.

Projects have differing temporalities and time lags. Some students love their subjects and find knowledge as an end in itself; others are absorbed by extracurricular projects the same way. Yet while those studying mentally expanding liberal disciplines may have shelved the question of where they are going, work after graduation has been postponed, not abolished. Others consciously use the years of study to augment their reflexive agency with professional competences, organisational experiences and social networks for later use.

What circumstances trigger or favour self-formation? A strong finding of research on international student agency is that cross-border mobility is associated with concentrated student self-formation (Marginson, 2014; Montgomery, 2010; Tran, 2016). Cross-cultural international students, negotiating plural identities, experience accelerated academic learning and, often, profound transformation of outlook. Far from being people in deficit in the host country, most international students are strong agents piloting their lives, albeit with difficulty in conditions not under their control. Their reflexivity is worked hard.

These experiences of international students might be paralleled in other forms of mobility, including school to work transition; students who are first in family to enter higher education; and those moving from rural and remote locations to large city universities. It may be that this kind of intensive transformation is the largest single social contribution that higher education makes. Perhaps the primary implication of higher education as self-formation is the need to find ways to bring deep transformation in reach of all students.
CONCLUSIONS

Learned self-formation and individual agency are the means by which graduates achieve other outcomes – the larger social respect and earning power that graduates command; their capacity to navigate careers and labour markets, and to deal with government and organisations; the potentials for and in social, geographic, cultural and temporal mobility; the enhanced understanding of the world, culture and people. Some of these qualities can be measured directly, or through proxies, and are attested by research on the outcomes of higher education (e.g. McMahon, 2009; OECD, 2015). However, strictly speaking, careers, earnings, respect and enhanced mobility are not direct outcomes of higher education itself. The contribution of higher education itself is the production and augmentation of the reflexive autonomous agency of graduates which makes these outcomes possible. Reflexive agency does not produce or guarantee those outcomes – for example, social background, the labour markets and contingency, all affect employability – but it helps them to happen.

Higher education as self-formation is not well understood in government and public debate. It is missing from economic policy discussion. This focuses on graduate-as-other and graduate-as-object, for example when graduate outcomes are defined by human capital values such as earnings. This does not address the educational mission and its outcomes in persons. The main purpose of higher education is not someone else’s profit, or even graduate profit. Graduates are not defined by their economic value. The purpose of higher education lies in the graduate-as-subject, and graduates themselves define its value. Because graduates use what they have learned in higher education to form themselves in later life, the process has no necessary limit. Higher education is an output maximiser.

The economic imaginary, the transformation of nature and time into transferrable abstract value, under conditions of scarcity, cannot comprehend any of this. It does not grasp autonomy, reflexivity, transformation via knowledge or open-ended potentials. While higher education, like many processes, is readily represented as an economy, the economic imaginary is not fitted for making higher education. It is fitted for regulating it from outside.

Higher education as self-formation is the answer to the pervasive utilitarianism and credentialism that limits people’s imaginings about higher education, restricting what governments expect, students expect and higher education routinely offers. It does not reduce the contributions of higher education. On the contrary, it has the potential to greatly expand those contributions. Reflexive agency through immersion in knowledge is the source of all of the ‘uses’ of graduates, all of the social and economic functions and activities that they carry out, from first graduate job to the end of their lives.
developed is the agency freedom of graduates, the more that they have to offer, in every sphere.

Higher education as self-formation is the best response to the economism of neo-liberalism, the subordination of education to an external system of valuation based on capitalist economics. Higher education cannot create a profitable economy directly. What it does is help to form people who can do many things, including the creation of economic value. To those who argue that higher education should focus on employability the answer is this. Graduates maximise their own employability when they have enhanced personal agency, permeated by knowledge and sustained by the capacity to continually learn and develop themselves reflexively. All of the ‘generic’ skills – flexibility and adaptability, initiative, communication, working in teams, creativity and lateral thinking – are skills of the self-forming reflexive person with agency freedom. These skills are real, except they are not solely generic. They are acquired through immersion in knowledge and never content free or context free. The creativity of the mathematician, the engineer, the linguist and the lawyer all entail creation, but the imaginings, discourses and applications are distinct.

Like all large ideas, such as equality of opportunity, higher education as student self-formation is both a norm to pursue and a living reality. By no means all existing students achieve it. Many people remain outside higher education. This mission is always incomplete. Yet it is often achieved, and it is both necessary and sufficient to higher education.

Student agency does not evolve in a vacuum and its potentials are constantly intersected by factors external to the self, especially relations of power. Concentrations of capital, hierarchy, inequality, poverty, discrimination and racism are obstacles to effective freedom and retard agency freedom. Yet social structures are partly open. Agents, severally or collectively, cannot necessarily overcome structure, but they can work on themselves, and in that manner shape the agency/structure relation. Higher education cannot overcome economic and social inequalities by itself – it cannot redistribute incomes and wealth – but it can provide people with tools for more effectively coping with and surmounting inequality.

Clegg (2011) argues that for disadvantaged persons the way through is always agency. This underlines the need to place an empowering higher education, a higher education immersed in knowledge and fostering critical reflexivity in ongoing self-transformation, in reach of all. Higher education systems that exclude parts of the population, or are so stratified as to empty out powerful knowledge from lower tier institutions, are regressive.

Should higher education address structural constraints by shaping the self-formation of students in terms of prescriptions for the better society? Confucianism and Bildung say ‘yes’. But which ideal society, and who decides? These classical pedagogical traditions have the essence of higher
Higher education as student self-formation

education right: the self-evolution of persons via immersion in knowledge. In that respect Confucianism and Bildung, and even J.H. Newman (1852/1982) are more advanced, more modern than the economic imaginary in higher education. Yet Confucianism, Bildung and Newman now seem to underestimate learner autonomy and the scope for will-bearing reflexivity in students. They are doctrinal, seeing education as an induction into societies with pre-given values. Students need teachers, and a curriculum, because students are mostly neophytes in the knowledge in which they are immersed. Yet students in higher education are also adults, with a will. They are not educational objects but subjects, and they will make the world as they wish. Rather than trying to control the future society that will be formed by students after they become graduates, higher education should enhance their scope to make their lives, and society, as they determine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Early versions of this chapter were presented as lectures at University College London Institute of Education (29 November 2017), Peking University (11 June 2019) and Tsinghua University (27 June 2019) and published in Chinese in Jiaoyu Yanjiu (Educational Research), 2020 (1), translated by Xiaona Wang. Thank you to Xiaona and to Jiang Kai of Peking University. The author is very grateful to Soyoung Lee, whose doctoral work at the University of Oxford informed discussion of the psychology of agency after Vygotsky, and student learning in higher education. The author is responsible for all interpretations.

REFERENCES


Assessing the contributions of higher education


Sayer, A. (2000). Realism and social science. SAGE.


