

## Higher education as self-formation: the case of cross-border students\*

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### Abstract

In research in cross-cultural psychology, cross border international education is largely understood as a process of 'adjustment' to host country norms and institutions. The student is seen as in deficit in relation to these requirements. Home country identity becomes a barrier to be broken down. This paper instead defines international education as a process of self-formation in which student subjects manage their lives reflexively, fashioning their own changing identities, albeit within social conditions and relations largely not made by them. International students form their selves and their trajectories between home country identity, host country identity and a larger set of cosmopolitan options.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AS SELF-FORMATION

### Introduction

This article derives from reflections on almost a decade of research into student welfare and security (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir & Forbes-Mewett, 2010), cross-cultural relations in international education (Marginson & Sawir, 2011), and policy and regulation in international education (Marginson, 2012; Ramia, Marginson & Sawir, 2013). The research included semi-structured interviewees of 30-60 minutes each with 290 international student subjects studying in Australia and New Zealand, four fifths of them from East, Southeast and South Asia.

More than two thirds of the student interviewees had no close family members in the country of education. Nine in ten drew support from family but while some had spouse and/or children with them, very few lived with their birth families. Nearly all were independent on a daily basis, physically removed from their origins and making their own way through the world. This led to contrasting effects. On one hand almost two thirds of the students reported feeling lonely and/or isolated at some point during their stay abroad. A minority said the sense of loneliness persisted after the initial six months (Marginson, *et al.*, 2010, pp. 338-343 & 376-382; Sawir, *et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, independence brought with it a sense of freedom as self-determination. Here freedom was understood not so much as negative freedom, freedom from constraint, but as freedom to do and to be.

All international students cross the border to become different, whether through learning, through graduating with a degree, through immersion in the linguistic setting, or simply through growing up. Often there is a kind of person they want to become, though none can fully imagine that person before the transformation. Some respond to change only when they must. Many let it happen. Others run to meet it. This experience of self-directed agency during the foreign sojourn – of the joys and terrors of making a self amid a range of often novel choices – is under recognized yet widely felt. As two students put it:

There's hell a lot of differences between living there and living here. The advantage of living out here is it teaches you how to be independent, the survival of the fittest. How to do things, manage your entire life. Back home, you have your parents to support you, back up. Out here, there is no back up; you're on your own. There are crucial decisions, and the decisions have to be taken by you, not by your parents. You learn a lot. (male, 27, business studies).

Some experienced this sense of independent self as liberating:

I love it here, I'm comfortable. You see the thing is, I fit in over here. I don't fit in, in India, I'm a feminist, OK, I'm a strong-minded woman and in the India sub-continent

it is very difficult. [Here] I have the freedom to lead my own life and I am not expected to come home and... I don't have all the social pressures to deal with. I have my life.  
(female, 19, arts)

The extended engagement with international students has called into question the way international education is framed in social research. The article argues for a paradigm shift, from understanding international education as a process of 'adjustment' of foreign students to local requirements, which is the paradigm that currently dominates research on international students, to understanding international education as *self-formation*. It provides a perspective on identity and agency, explores the potentials and limits of self-formation, and considers the strategies of self-formation used by students. It does not ground each step in illustrative proofs of an empirical kind. It is essentially a theorization.

### *The adjustment paradigm in psychology*

In cross-cultural psychology international education is mostly understood as a process of 'adjustment' or 'acculturation' to the requirements and habits of the host country. Though one early and seminal cross-cultural psychologist remarked that the adjustment paradigm was not essential to the field of knowledge (Bochner, 1972) it been widely used. For an early and superior discussion within the paradigm see Church (1982). Volet and Jones (2012) provide a critical review of the paradigm that complements the present article.

In the adjustment paradigm, international education is imagined as a journey from the home country culture to the host country culture, facilitated by language proficiency and cross-cultural engagement. Each culture is modelled as constant. International students progress through host institutions by acquiring local attributes necessary to psychological well-being and academic success. The host country culture is normalized, the host country institutions are taken as given and the international student is seen as in deficit in relation to host country requirements. Individual studies vary in the extent to which they entertain notions of multiple identities. Some see continued commitment to home country culture as non pathological. But quantitative analysis works best with fixed, bounded and if possible, singular notions of identity; and the end point of the narrative is assimilation. In this work home country identity is often seen as a phenomenon or as an obstacle to be broken down.

Here the adjustment paradigm too readily slots into the sense of cultural superiority that (it must be said) is rife in English language education systems (e.g. Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson, *et al.*, 2010; Montgomery, 2010). After all, runs the ethnocentric logic, why else would international students enrol in our institutions, unless to become like us? It is taken for granted that cross-cultural psychologists and host

country educators know the students better than they know themselves, and know what they must become. In pedagogies informed by this approach the agency of the international student is not wholly suppressed. Rather the objective is to remake student agency by other-forming it, to 'empty out' those prior habits and values seen as obstacles and (ironically) to install in the student from outside an imagined 'Western' autonomous learner (Doherty & Singh, 2005. One such text still widely used to inform university teaching is Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

This is galling for international students, many of whom state that they want to acquire those local attributes necessary for success, are open to advice, and often impressed by what they see in the country of education – without seeing the need to abandon their home country selves and hand over their identities for re-acculturation.

One strand of research that embodies these limitations is the work on 'cultural fit' by Ward and colleagues (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, pp. 30-48). This assumes that the closer the cultural match between students and host institution, the more likely that students will 'adjust' successfully and progress academically (e.g. Ward & Chang, 1997; Leong & Ward, 2000). The research works with essentialist notions of cultural identity such as Hofstede's (1998) contrast between fixed 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' cultures.

However, the idea of 'cultural fit' repeatedly fails the empirical tests used in this body of work. Students measured as culturally distant from the host country do not necessarily perform worse or exhibit lower levels of well-being. Cultural identity is not necessarily related to academic success (Li & Gasser, 2005) – relations are mediated by many other factors – and international students do not leave their home country identities behind. 'Heritage' identity goes on changing in the host country. Students mix and match identities in complex and variable ways in an often deliberate fashion (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Remarkably, the empirical failure of the cultural fit hypothesis has not deterred its advocates from making repeated attempts. This shows the resilience of the starting assumptions (e.g. Ward, Leong & Low, 2004; Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2006).

The element underplayed in the work on 'cultural fit', and most other studies of adjustment, is the active agency of international students themselves. This is not solely due to ethnocentrism. It is also a methodological problem. By no means all psychological studies in international education are ethnocentric and some discuss identity as open and plural, as is discussed below. However, it is difficult to apprehend changing human identities, imagining, agency, reflexivity and self-creation using the methods of regression analysis that dominate mainstream cross-cultural psychology. Qualitative methods are less precise but more inclusive. Semi-structured interviews allow student subjects to contribute to conceptual development, for example by introducing insights and ideas new to the research field. There is much talk of 'student-centredness' in education. The idea of international education as

self-formation, not other-directed adjustment, puts student-centredness into practice. This has both methodological and normative implications.

## Agency and identity

What then are possible elements of an alternate approach to international student identity and agency, in which students are primarily seen as self-formed rather than 'adjusted'? The theorisation that follows draws partly on Sen (1985, 1992, 1999, 2000), who is centrally interested in human capability in the context of cultural plurality.

*Identity* is ambiguous. It is both what we call ourselves and what others call us. Bourdieu (1993, p. 30) talks of self-positioning human subjects who are at the same time positioned within a socially constituted 'space of possibles'. While all human relations are socially constructed and limited, the notion of self-formation used here is more optimistic than Bourdieu about openness and autonomy. Subjects choose mobility to alter their space of possibles. International students shape a mix of identity from a larger portfolio of socially-defined choices. Sen emphasizes that 'we all have multiple identities' and our different identities are associated with distinctive and sometimes competing concerns. As well as the shared identity of human and specific identity of national citizen, people variously identify in terms of religion, class, gender, locality, kinship, politics, 'professional identities,' like doctor or educator, and others (Sen, 1999, pp. 116-125). Increasingly, via global communications and mobility, identities cross national borders.

This does not mean identity is fragmented or miscellaneous, like a flux without feature in which each element is interchangeable with every other. Identity is constituted as a field of difference in which some identities are primary. In the 290 interviews many international students saw certain elements of self-identity as slow to change, elements linked to familial relations, or cultural or national identity, or language of first use, or memories defined as 'home' or 'the true I.' People need both self-definition and the capacity to respond to change. Paradoxically this aspect of singular certainty, with its more lasting signifiers of self, is among the conditions that enable flexibility and plurality.

Nevertheless, a taxonomy of identity only takes us part of the way to self-formation. Identity is not the whole person but a cloak the person puts on, one that might be changed later. There is an awkwardness about identity, a certain brittle inflexibility. It freezes a moving target. People evolve. Their chosen labels do not. Though these labels may take different shades of meaning they are tied to common use, accumulate baggage and are not infinitely elastic. People need the security and certainty promised by identity but labels are not a substitute for a holistic description of the person and their relational characteristics. Identity is only one tool

that people use when forming themselves. It is only one of the markers whereby international students (and any persons) may be understood.

### *Agency freedom*

How might we understand the self-forming person, given that identity alone is insufficient? If identity is what a person understands themselves or others to be, agency is the sum of a person's capacity to act on her/his own behalf. Whereas a person's identity labels are self-chosen or imposed by social institutions (or research) that person's agency is irreducible. Sen provides a persuasive account of freedom as self-determination. An 'agent' is 'someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements 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' (Sen, 2000, p. 19). 'Responsible adults must be in charge of their own well-being; it is for them to decide how to use their capabilities'. He adds that a person's capabilities 'depend on the nature of the social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms' (p. 288). In relation to international students in higher education, the first step in apprehending their self-formation is to understand these students as self-responsible adults in Sen's sense and not as akin to dependent children.

Sen's notion of human freedom embodies 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 or F.A. Hayek. Second, freedom as the capacity of the individual to act, which depends on capacities and resources, and on social arrangements that enable people to put their choices into practice. Sen calls this 'freedom as power', and in his later work 'effective freedom'. Others call it positive freedom (Sen, 1985, 1992). 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. The three elements of freedom are interdependent. Control freedom and effective freedom can be understood as defensive and proactive moments of human agency. Agency freedom has the pivotal role in Sen's imagining of freedom.

Sen notes that the perspectives of 'well-being' and 'agency' yield differing notions of freedom (Sen, 1985, p. 169). The notion of well-being suggests a choice-making individual but does not necessarily imply an active or interactive individual. In contrast the notion of agency suggests an intrinsically proactive human will. In the well-being perspective, the person is seen as a beneficiary whose interests and advantages are foremost. In the agency perspective, the person is seen more as a doer and judge, with different implications for the person's goals and valuations. 'The well-being aspect of a person is important in assessing a person's *advantage*, whereas the agency aspect is important in assessing what a person can do in line with his or her conception of *the good*', which need not be to the person's advantage

(p. 206, emphasis in original). The perspective of well-being has occupied more attention than that of agency. (Sen does not say so but this may be the fruit of utilitarianism and neo-classical economics). Nevertheless, economic well-being is an insufficient foundation for liberty. Agency freedom moves beyond an economic calculus to include status, dignity, family, friends, making things, satisfying work, and the scope to realize forms of life. Shared collective goods matter, as well as individual goods. Self-forming human agents choose their agendas from the menus of the possible.

Some people imagine the impossible for themselves and change their notions of the good at a later stage. In cross-border international education, in which students visualize the journey before seeing the terrain, not all of the early dreams can be realized. The students adjust themselves and their preferred trajectory as they go.

## International education as self-formation

Higher education as self-formation goes beyond the notion of the student as consumer in a market. It has more in common with child rearing than, say, making and selling washing machines. It incorporates investment in the self as human capital, the attributes and credentials acquired in education, which change what a person can do. For cross-border international students, more than most students, the costs are large. The economic pay-offs matter. Yet career and income are rarely the whole of the transformation they seek.

International education as self-formation takes in a larger set of behaviours of self-cultivation and self-improvement. It includes learning to speak in new conversational idioms. It includes the acquisition of knowledge and personal sensibilities via liberal education as cultural capital. It incorporates social capital, whereby higher education fosters functional relationships and social networks. It accounts for the fact that students may acquire new values and beliefs in the country of education, and perhaps greater tolerance and more cosmopolitan relations (Montgomery, 2010). Here the growth of individual capabilities and the growth of sociability are interdependent. The different effects of higher education are often seen as in tension. For example higher education for investment in personal earning power is counter-posed to education for knowledge or self-knowledge as if the two aspects cannot coexist. Yet many students want both. The different heterogeneous purposes all find shelter under the umbrella of student self-formation. Each of liberal and vocational programs contributes to the reflexive self-making of the person and her/his assembly of skills, knowledge, talents, habits and aspirations.

International education as self-formation also means that instead of the international student being seen as habitually weak or deficient, the student is seen as a strong agent piloting the course of her/his life. While all higher education students—like all human subjects—are engaged in continuous self-formation, in



international students the role of agency in self-change is especially apparent. First, their situation requires them to change in dynamic fashion. As noted, they mostly have high practical autonomy in that they live away from their birth families. Especially in the early stages, they acquire new attributes very quickly in their studies, institutional dealings and day-to-day lives. Self-formation does not follow the equilibrium models of psychology. In fact international students seek disequilibria: they want to become different and often as quickly as possible. (This contrasts with Ramsay, Barker and Jones, 1999, p. 130, who imagine the 'adjustment' of student sojourners as the successive removal of 'psychological dissatisfiers' generating 'disequilibria'). At the least this ambition extends to the acquisition of English language proficiency, academic capabilities and some local friends. As the sojourn continues many change the way they live, their consumption patterns and their even personal beliefs.

The potentials should not be romanticized. Though these students are on a chosen pathway and its outcomes can be rich, their day-to-day self-formation mostly wears the cloak of necessity, of survival and coping, rather than voluntary adventure. Rizvi remarks that the promised transformations are 'inherently contradictory'. People find themselves pulled between on one hand 'cultural flexibility', on the other 'cultural uncertainty and confusion' (Rizvi, 2009, p. 261). Not all international students achieve full confidence. As always with global phenomena, both potentials and outcomes are unequally distributed. International students form themselves under social conditions they do not control, conditions that shape their 'space of possibilities' that differs from student to student. Some students have more resources than others. Some are more vulnerable than others. Only some students bear personal attributes that blend easily into the country of education. For many it is an unfamiliar and sometimes-hostile environment, day-to-day communications are difficult, and learning curves are steep with the top out of reach. Many want intensive social engagement with local students but the locals rarely reciprocate (Marginson, *et al.*, 2010, chapters 13-15). International education in English-speaking countries contributes little to the self-formation of most local students which takes place elsewhere. These blockages and turmoils send international students down some paths and not others. The international student does not command her/his own destiny. Yet even when that student is isolated, or at the behest of others, or caught between two conflicting sets of expectations, she/he exercises more independent autonomy than most other persons.

In addition to its comprehensive and agential character, international education as self-formation is distinctive in other ways. It is open, complex and highly reflexive. And like all self-formation it is historically grounded and subject to relations of power.

The self-formation of international students is open not only because agency freedom enables openness but because the institutional and cultural settings make demands that cannot be known until they have been lived, and to which the student



must respond. Under new conditions people do new things. Compared to local students, most international students face wider and more varied possibilities. The living environment of non-mobile persons is mostly pre-given. International students construct those living environments, in terms of physical infrastructures, where they live and many of their intimate possessions; and social infrastructures, their formal and informal relationships. International education offers not just problems and barriers but opportunities for novel activity and personal growth. For example, the absence of close affective ties opens the way for new friendships with unknown potentials for learning and risk. There is also scope to combine cultures in chosen ways. Many students do so explicitly, talking about cultural selection with each other. They access home cultures, host cultures and those of other international students, with whom it is often easier to form friendships than with locals (Kashima & Loh, 2006).

Student self-formation is irreducibly complex because it entails more than one project – educational, economic, occupational, familial, cultural, social, linguistic, etc. – and cannot be reduced to one indicator on a common scale. To understand the self-formation of a single international student it is necessary to synthesize these different elements. This can only be done by acts of complex judgement. Yet individual students make such holistic judgements about themselves on a continuing basis. The process is highly reflexive. In self-formation people learn to fashion themselves as they go, often conscious of their own changing subjectivities, working critically using feedback from themselves (and others). International students often have difficulty making themselves what they want to be. Mostly, things work out differently than they hope or expect. But they persist, reshaping their intentions as they go. They range between pushing against what they see as their own inadequacies, temporarily accepting the limitations, and thrusting forward again. Highly reflexive agents readily identify and challenge their own assumptions (Rizvi, 2008, p. 33). Not all international students talk readily about their own reflexive evolution and changing identity in interview but many do.

The self-formation of these students is historically grounded in that it is affected by the times and places in which it occurs. The globally mobile self is often active in more than one place-time simultaneously, linked by communications and media to the home country, as Appadurai (1996) states. Self-formation is touched in all the institutions, professional environments, public places, activity groups and private settings; by all locations in which identity is invested and action is shaped; by cross-cultural encounters, material economics, policy and regulation and other relations of power. Non-white international students studying in English-speaking countries often experience acts of discrimination or abuse that limit the potential for self-formation by discouraging closer integration in the host society (Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson, *et al.*, 2010, Chapter 15).

## Strategies for self-formation

In sum, cross-border students change their circumstances to change themselves and their own pathways and potentials. Their self-formation is continuous, its momentum sustained in memory, observation and experience and by the conscious fashioning of the self as one's own project that is typical of the educated life (Rose, 1999). In the host country the cross-border student fashions herself or himself using both resources that she/he brings to the country of education, and also resources she/he finds there—where international students open themselves to the host culture, if only to the extent needed to survive.

Self-formation is a work of the imagination in which the possibilities are configured by coordinating more than one cultural set. One distinctive feature of the international student sojourn is heightened awareness of plural selves and the many possibilities this offers. For the most part, student self-formation amid cultural plurality is configured in one of two different ways; and in the case of some persons, in both ways. These two methods or strategies for managing self-definition and development are frequently alluded to in cross-cultural psychology and sociology. Various terms are used for each. Here the two strategies will be called *multiplicity* and *hybridity*.

### *Multiplicity*

The first strategy of self-formation is multiplicity. The sojourning student is more than one person living more than one life. In early work Berry (1974) suggested a bi-cultural self in which two different identities coexist, with variable emphasis on one or the other. Kashima and Loh (2006) note that more than two cultural sets are possible. Often the fault line between the different selves is language of use. The student is a somewhat different person in host country settings using host country language and cultural references. Pedersen (1991, p. 22) finds this kind of multiplicity is common. He suggests that identity takes the form of an upper and lower layering, akin to an archaeological dig. The cross-border student maintains home country beliefs and practices in domains like family, marriage and religion. The student layers over the top a set of new day-to-day practices facilitating associations in the host country. The student also acquires a heightened sense of cultural relativism and greater reflexivity, with a more conscious and deliberative approach to personal choices and identity formation. Persons who are bi-cultural by birth tend to practise more constructive and facile cultural mixing (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 8).

Berry imagines bi-cultural identity in terms of a linear narrative, a journey from home country origin to host country destination. The oscillation is between past and present—as if memory and experience do not coexist in the present—, memory is not continually reinterpreted, cultural contact with home is not maintained and

heritage identity is not a living self. But rather, as noted by Butcher (2002) in a study of international graduates after their return home, there are many possible multi-cultural configurations of identity. Despite the relations of domination in which host country cultures are often expressed, cultural maintenance and adaptation are not necessarily in opposition (Lee & Koro-Ljungberg, 2007). This brings us to the second strategy of self-formation: hybridity.

## *Hybridity*

Using hybridity the international student synthesizes different cultural and relational elements into a newly formed self. At the end of the sojourn the student, rather than flipping back into a home country identity, takes home a transformed self. Rizvi (2005, p. 336) sees hybridity as 'a space in which we must learn to manage cultural uncertainties'. Rather than cultures being experienced as holistic, 'pristine and authentic', they are contaminated by each other. When students travel, 'cultural forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms'. In a world constituted by 'flows of finance, technology and people, through tourism, education and migration', hybridization has become 'a condition of social existence'. It is no longer 'something exceptional'.

Like multiplicity, hybridity is associated with a heightened reflexivity and a sense of cultural relativism. Openness to the other is essential. There are few endpoints or neat resolutions. Goldbart and colleagues (2005, p. 105) see higher education as a 'contact zone' in which different cultures 'wrestle with each other' in conditions of unequal power. Cultures rarely combine symmetrically. Rizvi cautions that while hybridity is 'a useful antidote to cultural essentialism', hybridity alone does not explain cultural relations. It remains necessary to investigate 'how hybridity takes place, the form it takes in particular contexts, the consequences it has for particular sections of the community and when and how are particular hybrid formations progressive or regressive' (Rizvi, 2005, p. 338).

Each strategy can be described by spatial metaphors (though such metaphors have their limits). Multiplicity is associated with dividing or differentiating. Hybridity is associated with integrating, suturing, combining or recombining. Here splitting and combining are two sides of the self-formation coin. Both strategies are additive, in different ways, expanding the reach and flexibility of human agents across their fields of activity. Partial hybridity is part of the process of managing multiplicity. Without hybridity multiple identities are experienced as fragmentation and/or contradiction (see the discussion of Baumeister's notions of 'identity deficit' and identity conflict in Leong and Ward (2000, p. 764).) Conversely, new hybrid selves must adapt somewhat between multiple settings. The distinction between the two strategies is never absolute and there are continuous interactions between them. Note that neither multiplicity nor hybridity involves displacing or giving

up elements of prior identity. Identity displacement is a different strategy of subject formation, one that is normally imposed on students from outside the self. Doherty and Singh (2005) describe identity displacement in certain foundation programs for international students in Australia. The strategy is secured by essentializing cultural differences and imposing on students a 'pure' Anglo-Australian curriculum that cuts off any possibility of multiple pedagogical affiliation and hybrid projects.

### *The centering self*

It needs a strong sense of one's own project to engineer multiplicity and hybridity in a deliberative fashion. Sen's notion of agency freedom suggests an active, shaping and coordinating will – a *centering self* that sustains changing identity while managing cultural plurality. The centering self arbitrates tensions and conflicts between roles, between sites and between the expectations of different groups. It propels the student into active social encounters with diverse others, makes hard choices and changes course where needed. The centering self is not a whole bounded individual in itself: identity with a capital 'I'. It is a broadcasting and switching station not an operating system. It is only one part of the self.

Cross-cultural psychology identifies this centering, coordinating will, by one or another name, as a key piece of the puzzle. For example: 'Cross-cultural research has demonstrated a stable association between an internal locus of control and psychological well-being and satisfaction, independent of the origins and destinations of sojourners, immigrants, and refugees' (Ward, *et al.*, 2004, p. 138). Savicki and colleagues (Savicki, Downing-Burnette, Heller, Binder & Suntinger, 2004) emphasize positive, agency-building factors in intercultural 'adjustment'. Chirkov and colleagues (2007) focus directly on self-determination. Pyvis and Chapman (2005, 23) note 'a nexus of multi membership where we define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of identity into one identity'. According to Kettle (2005) agency is the process of producing the self, the 'site of multiple subjectivities' (p. 48). Kettle studied one Thai student who was 'working as an agent of his own change' (p. 45). Agency was not given and had to be self-nurtured.

Cross-cultural research also identifies certain personal qualities that facilitate the centralizing functions of agency. Studies emphasize open and direct communication (Yang, *et al.*, 2006, p. 490), learning quickly, initiating and responding, entering the other's imagination in empathetic fashion, and relating to diverse culture/identity sets. Some identify emotional regulation, openness, flexibility and critical thinking (Matsumoto, LeRoux, Bernhard & Gray, 2004; Savicki, *et al.*, 2004, pp. 312-313). Bradley (2000, p. 419) suggests some students cope well because they 'carry their worlds with them in their known set of behaviours and perceptions of self'. They are especially conscious of their identity history, facilitating reflexive self-formation. Redmond (2000, p. 153) mentions 'social decentring', the capacity to take

in another person's thoughts and feelings across cultural lines. Allan (2003, p. 83) nominates the capacity to relate to people whatever their cultural background, and using diverse cultural encounters to enhance one's own cultural identity. Kashima and Loh (2005) show that students with a greater tolerance for cultural ambiguity and complexity exhibit higher levels of 'adjustment'. Cannon's (2000, pp. 364-365) study of Indonesian students finds they learn to tolerate and understand divergent viewpoints. 'In psychological terms, they have become more complex. Complexity is the result of two broad processes: differentiation and integration', confirming multiplicity and hybridity. Eventually the students move to a 'third place' they share with other experienced sojourners, 'the unbounded point of intersection where interactants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds meet and communicate successfully' (p. 373).

Many researchers argue that communicative competence, or ease in cross-cultural relationships, are conditions of effective agency. Kettle's (2005, p. 51) Thai student believed his effective agency was non-existent until he learned to communicate and interact with local persons. The vice versa also applies: strong agency assists both language proficiency and cross-cultural relations. Li and Gasser (2005) focus on cross-cultural self-efficacy, combining interactivity with agency. Ward and colleagues (2004) discuss extraversion, combining communication and agency. The larger the zone of interaction between international student and host nationals, the more opportunities there are for creative identity making. Discrimination forces identity splitting and conflict instead of identity suturing (hybridity) or managed multiplicity under international student control (Leong & Ward, 2000, p. 771). This three-way interdependency of agency, communication and cross-cultural engagement recurs through the research. It is confirmed again in Marginson *et al.* (2010). Nevertheless, many students who lack full proficiency in English or close contact with host nationals exercise a remarkable autonomous drive. The stresses of the international sojourn, while taxing the energies and imaginations of those undertaking it, suggest robust persons, not fragile persons trapped by cultural conflict. Even where students are subordinated by ethnocentric practices that place them in deficit, their sense of self is strong enough to adapt to those practices, while at the same time managing their own emotional reactions to being stripped of status.

## Conclusions

Cross border international education is defined here not as other-formation but as *self-formation*, in which student subjects manage their own lives and continuously fashion their changing selves. The student must fashion a self – that is, the constellation of perceptions, intentions, memories, values, habits and actions, including a sense of what is important – in a world of plural identities: home country, host country and perhaps a larger set of cosmopolitan options. The idea of self-formation also

focuses on inner-directedness, self-will. A sustained period of cross-border education stretches international students from non English-speaking countries. It calls up an advanced capacity in personal agency.

The international student self and trajectory are continuously created in a shifting combination of (1) the given material conditions, including (2) the social relations in which the student is embedded and a partner in making, and (3) the *agency freedom* or active will of the student. Each student deals with many challenges and problems. None is altogether master of her/his individual fate. None of us are. But in the self-formation perspective the conscious agency of the student is irreducible and ever-present. An emphasis on active agency points to different observations and findings to those derived when cross-border students are positioned in a stress and coping framework, with emphasis on dysfunction or welfare deficit, as in much of the counselling literature (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999, pp. 423-424). The self-formation perspective suggests that pedagogical strategies negating self-formation are at cross-purposes with the actual learning that takes place. It draws attention to the strategies used and decisions enacted by sojourning students, including the tools and resources they use in constructing environments and making pro-active choices. This is not to talk down the need for services provided for the specific needs of international students. It is to argue solutions often lie in strengthening agency freedom and its scope. Expanding the space in which students are free of constraint and coercion, for example authoritarian administration or discriminatory practice, augments freedom as control. Enhancing the resources facilitating agency, for example programs designed to augment communicative competence, or provide housing, augments freedom as power.

Higher education as self-formation is both normative framework and living reality. It can be observed empirically, in classrooms and in students' lives. It is also a distinctive approach to international education grounded in the reflexive self-determination of student subjects. Institutions and teachers can build conscious international student agency and work with it, rather than suborning or coercing it. Teaching, like student services and institutional organization, can foster international students—and their histories, identities, perspectives, learning practices and decisions—as worthy of equal respect. That is the key to a decisive break from ethnocentrism. Then the international student encounter with English-speaking higher education systems becomes understood not as a journey of conversion but a never finished cultural negotiation.

The approach taken in this paper is challenging but has some support from other scholars (e.g. Asmar, 2005, p. 293; Singh, 2005; p. 10). Volet and Jones (2012, abstract) discuss 'the neglected role of agency in research on international students' sociocultural adaptation'. As noted this article does not provide final proofs of self-formation. It requires empirical testing. But it has been endorsed by some student subjects. When the idea of international education as self-formation is discussed in the author's seminars with East and Southeast Asian students, a common response



is the shock of unexpected recognition. 'Yes, that's it! That's who I am!' state the students. 'Yes, that's what I am doing here.'

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