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International Student Mobility: The Need for a More Agential Approach

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The latest decades have been marked with economic arguments for higher education overall and international education specifically. Within this popular perspective, international students are seen as consumers and income-maximisers (Ashwin, 2020; Marginson, 2019). Also, the literature is rife with deficit framing of international students, as highlighted by recent studies (c.f., Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021; Volet & Jones, 2012). In such a constellation, students are seen on a journey from their home culture to their host culture, where the host culture is a normative goal to be achieved. The arguments revolve around how international students can adapt/acculturate into the host culture better so that they can be more successful and happier in their mobility experience (Marginson, 2014). Such perspectives on international students fall short of explaining the holistic formation students go through in their international education.

This editorial piece argues for rethinking how we position international students. International students go through a holistic *self-formation* process through their active *agency*. Although the two concepts—agency and self-formation—are not the same, they are inherently connected. While self-formation depicts the holistic formation process students go through, student agency is the critical element in charge of self-formation. These two concepts are about positioning international students as captains of their international mobility experiences. Agency and self-formation represent a mindset that we—as educators, researchers and practitioners—should internalise in order to perceive international students beyond ‘adapters’ to their host contexts or ‘consumers’ of education services who are trying to maximise the return to their investment in overseas study.

A historical overview of how students have been positioned in higher learning supports the argument highlighted in the previous paragraph. Students in higher education have been at the centre historically (Oldac et al., in press). Historians of higher learning usually take the medieval university as the origins of higher education today. A review of broad perspectives since the medieval times; for example, the dialogic relationship between masters and students in the

medieval university (Lowe & Yasuhara, 2017; Välimaa, 2019), the enlightenment concept of *Bildung* (Biesta, 2002; Östling, 2018) or the more recent discussions of liberal education famously highlighted by Newman (1907), all point to active positioning of students. They are united in their position against a narrow definition of higher learning designed for specific economic gains or deficit framing (Oldac et al., in press). However, the shifting rhetoric in the last decades towards an overwhelming use of economic arguments towards higher education led us almost to lose a sense of the educational purpose of international higher education. If only the economic arguments are considered, as Piketty (2014) demonstrated, people may be better off with private property investment instead of spending large amounts on higher education and mobility. Hence, reiterating the importance of agency and self-formation in international higher education is crucial.

The concept of international student agency is a complex one that involves broad discussions. A recent systematic review indicated that international student agency is mostly used as a ‘given’ in the academic literature with no proper discussions on it (Inouye et al., 2022). International student agency not only includes the general understanding of agency discussions in the broader sociological literature but also includes matters specific to the situations in international education. In its broadest sense, agency is the capacity and autonomy to act with one’s own objectives (Klemenčič, 2015; Kudo, 2022). In the specific context of higher education and within that international education, agency is, on the one hand, something that is required for a successful international education experience, specifically for pedagogical engagement and interacting with the host culture through self-reflective and self-regulative behaviours. On the other hand, agency is something that is expected to develop and flourish during mobility experience as international students cultivate further critical thinking, skills and well-being. In this regard, student agency is both a requirement and a result of international education.

The crossroads of education and agency is where the concept of self-formation comes to the fore. Self-formation is a multifaceted concept that is both old and new. It builds on the perennial ideas about education from East to West (Marginson, in press). The main idea behind it is the holistic formation of the student, for which the student agency is in charge. International students are the masters of their education experience in higher education. Student self-formation may vary from one cultural context to another, but the main idea behind it is the same: positioning students with active agency who holistically form themselves in their international education experience. The concept of self-formation sharply goes against reducing students to consumers, income maximisers or passive receivers.

Although self-formation is a broad phenomenon in higher education, it is specifically more pronounced in international education. International education is marked with immersion into a new cultural environment, creating

new friendship networks and encountering potentially new pedagogical practices in a host culture in a compressed period. Such an international experience makes self-formation even more visible. Self-formation in international education is a process of ‘becoming’ (Tran, 2016; Tran & Vu, 2018). International students, in a way, transform their ‘sphere of possibles’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30) while constructing their lives in a holistic way. In such a process, they draw from both the host and home cultures without having to subscribe to an either/or situation (Tran & Vu, 2018).

In conclusion, this editorial underscores the importance of agential perspectives in international higher education by highlighting the concepts of agency and self-formation. Fortunately, we are seeing an increasing number of publications highlighting the active role of students in international higher education (Inouye et al., 2022). Examples include how international students actively engage with pedagogies and learning in the host country (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021), how they engage in intercultural interactions (Kudo, 2022), how they find employment afterwards (Pham, 2021) and how they contribute to their home countries (Campbell, 2018; Oldac, 2022). There are increasing contributions from the *Journal of International Students*, too (e.g., Bui, 2021; Hou, 2023; Lin et al., 2022). However, more attention is needed for international student agency and self-formation as the dominant rhetoric in the policy landscape and existing literature still tilts towards the narrow economic definitions and deficit-framing of international students.

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