

Morphing a profit-making business into an intercultural experience
International education as self-formation

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[OPENING SLIDE]

We all know international education is Australia's third or fourth largest export industry, depending on the price of gold at any one time, and on the Australian dollar and on visa policy.

[MONEY]

We also know that international education is more than a profit-making business. It is an educational and social experience. It is an experience with immense potential to enrich the lives of all who are touched by it. 80 per cent of our students are from Asia, which is becoming the gravitational centre of the world. This large scale encounter with people from Asian nations has much to offer.

[MAP OF ASIA]

But the potential of international education as a cross—national and intercultural encounter is little realized.

We also know that if international education is to continue to succeed as a business in this country, the student experience must keep improving. It must keep improving in exactly this way, as an intercultural encounter.

[LONELY STUDENT]

Much research suggests the pathway to improvement lies in lifting the interactions between international students and local persons, especially students. These interactions create both educational and welfare benefits. Intercultural encounters lift students' language proficiency in English, their communicative competence. These encounters also strengthen their confidence, their agency.

Research on international education also shows that most international students want closer interaction with local students, and are prepared to take risks to achieve this. And it shows that most local students are not interested. International education is not the rich intercultural experience it could be. These patterns constantly recur in English speaking countries, and probably in some other countries.

We have not been able to move beyond this impasse. The problem as outlined so far suggests that local practices must change. They must change. Australians are often

too parochial, trapped within an Australia-centred view of a diverse and complex world.

[UPSIDE DOWN WORLD MAP]

It is not just local students who are too parochial. It is all of us. We need to think more broadly about the way we have all positioned international students. How international students are imagined, whom we think they are, whether we have got it right. We have not. The problem is deeply entrenched. If we are to move forward the first move must be conceptual.

This paper, which is grounded in almost a decade of research, including 310 interviews with individual international students, argues for a new conception of international education and of the international student. I call it *international education as self-formation*. But first I will look at the ideas currently dominant in international education. That will allow me to draw out for you, where I think we need to change our thinking.

[WHERE WE HAVE GONE WRONG]

Most of the research on cross-cultural relations in international education has been shaped within psychology. There's some excellent, insightful work here. But I regret to say that much of the literature is deeply ethnocentric.

In cross-cultural psychology international education is mostly understood as a process of externally mediated 'adjustment' or 'acculturation' to the requirements and habits of the host country. In this imagined world the ideal international student makes an orderly progression from home identity to host country identity. The host country culture is normalized without question. The international student is routinely seen as in deficit in relation to host country requirements. A Chinese or African or Indian home country identity then becomes seen as a barrier that must be broken down.

[SAD INDIAN STUDENTS]

It is widely believed—for example in the psychological literature on what is called 'cultural fit'—that the closer the values and practices of the student to those of the host country, the more likely it is the student will be happy and succeed academically. Psychological research has failed to prove this. Students whose values are very different to the host country often do very well. But the assumption about 'cultural fit' persists in the research literature. It is an assumption about cultural superiority. At bottom it means that our culture is superior to all other traditions no matter how venerable and accomplished.

[CHINESE CHARACTERS]

In many quarters, in Australian higher education, it is simply taken for granted host country educators know best, *and* know the students better than they know themselves. Or know what is good for them. After all, goes the underlying narrative,

why else would international students enrol in English speaking institutions, unless they want to be 'like us'?

[WHERE WE HAVE GONE WRONG]

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' prior habits and values and, ironically, install a Western autonomous learner that originates non-autonomously, from outside the self. It is simply imposed on the international student. The student is *other-formed*. So much for the commitment to student-centred learning and democracy. Those values are privileges for local students not international students, it seems.

However, deficit modelling has come under increasing criticism. And it is vital that we escape from it! The move I want you to make today is away from the other-formation approach, with its bedrock idea that we are culturally superior to the home countries of international students, to the idea of international education as *self-formation*.

In a regime of self-formation international students manage their own lives and continuously fashion their own changing identities. Like all of us, international students *make themselves*. They do so under conditions that they do not fully control, and within a web of different social relations that affect them. Yet international students, like all persons, are also inner-directed. They have self-will. They fashion a self—that is, a constellation of perceptions, intentions, memories, values, habits and actions, including the sense of what is urgent, and significant—and they must do so in a world of plural identities in which more than one self is possible and they can mix and match. They choose who they become. And they have chosen to have this choice. Interviews suggest that many international students cross borders to become different. They want to *change themselves* in the country of education.

Some respond to change only when they must. Many let it happen. Others run to meet it. Often, though not always, international students have a clear end in sight: there is a kind of person they want to become, though no self is ever fixed and final. Every international student deals with many challenges and problems. None is altogether master of her or his individual fate. None of us are. But in the self-formation perspective the conscious agency of the student is irreducible and ever-present.

This means that pedagogical strategies that negate self-formation, that set out to wipe the slate clean of the student's previous identity, are at cross-purposes with the actual learning processes of learning and development that are taking place.

[AGENCY AND IDENTITY]

This kind of talk about identity is different to the way identity is discussed in psychology. Psychology sees human identity as fixed. As I see it, human identity is open, fluid and in motion. It is never firmly fixed, whether on temporary or permanent basis. And identity is ambiguous at the core. It is both what we call ourselves, and what others call us. But when international education is understood as self-formation, the circle is closed: the international students define themselves.

This does not mean that identity is all flux without feature. It contains certain elements the student sees as relatively fixed, linked to family, or cultural or national identity, or first language, or memories defined as 'home' or 'the true I'. People need to know whom they are as well as where they are going and how they can change. Paradoxically, this element of singular certainty, this more long-lasting part of the self, is one of the conditions that make flexibility and plurality possible.

Identity is what a person understands themselves or others to be. It is like an item of personal clothing that we choose to wear, a badge or brand. But not the whole self. What part of the self chooses identity, and much else? We can call that part of the self *agency*. Agency is the sum of a person's capacity to act on her or his own behalf.

The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, political economist and political philosopher, provides a persuasive account of freedom as self-determination. For Sen 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'. This provides us with a way to think about international students, and all students 'Responsible adults must be in charge of their own well-being; it is for them to decide how to use their capabilities'. And, adds Sen, a person's capabilities 'depend on the nature of the social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms' (p. 288). The more freedom and respect we give to international students, the more that they can exercise freedom on their own behalf.

For Sen human freedom embodies three elements. First, there is the freedom of the individual from external threat, coercion or constraint. Sen calls this 'control freedom'. Isaiah Berlin called it negative freedom. Second, there is freedom as the capacity of the individual to act, which depends on capacities and resources, and on the social arrangements. Sen calls this 'freedom as power' and later, 'effective freedom'. Others call it positive freedom. Third, there is 'agency freedom'. This is the active human *will* that is the ultimate seat of self-directed conscious action. It guides the self-negotiation of identity. These three elements of freedom are interdependent. We need all of them if we are to exercise effective self-determination.

In the agency perspective, the person does not simply pursue his or her own interests and advantages, but is more broadly committed to action in line with 'his or her conception of *the good*', as Sen puts it Agency freedom takes in economic well-being and also moves beyond it. Status, dignity, family, friends, making things, satisfying work, the scope to create and realize forms of life, are also important. Shared collective goods matter, as well as individual goods. This is a richer picture of international student lives and motivations than the idea of students as consumers in a market, which covers only a small fraction of what each of us are about.

[INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AS SELF-FORMATION]

Let's now apply this notion of an active human agent to higher education. I want to argue that higher education in general—not just international education—should be understood as a process of self-formation by active human agents. This process of self-formation is an umbrella. It shelters a number of aspects. It takes in the idea of

self-cultivation and self-improvement. It takes in the acquisition of knowledge and personal sensibilities via liberal education. It takes in the notion of social capital, whereby higher education fosters useful relationships and social networks. It accounts for the facts that in higher education students can acquire new values and beliefs, learn tolerance and share cosmopolitan relations. Here the growth of individual capabilities and the growth of sociability are interdependent. It also includes investment in the self as human capital, the attributes and credentials acquired in formal education, which change what a person is and can do. Sen notes that education enhances the productive conditions for economic growth, but sees this is only a means to the end, which is the enhancement of people.

Now let's turn back to international students again. I want to emphasize that this idea of international education as self-formation markedly changes the way international students are seen and the way they are treated.

Instead of the international student being seen as weak, semi-helpless or in deficit, the student is seen as a *strong* agent piloting the course of her or his life. This is what international students are, most international students, most of the time. Many are highly accomplished academically, with excellent records in their home countries. In East Asia and Singapore the home countries are educationally stronger than Australia.

[PISA RESULTS SLIDE]

The majority of international students live away from family. So they must stand on their own feet, in a strange country. They must acquire new information and new personal attributes very quickly, in their studies, their institutional dealings and their day-to-day lives. Self-formation does not follow the equilibrium models of psychology. Many international students seek disequilibria. They hanker after dynamic change. They do not know what is in store, but they know they want to become a new person. Most international students want better English language proficiency. Most want to augment their careers and future earnings, with the help of a foreign education, and will work hard to achieve this. Some wish to migrate. Many want to develop away from home, enhancing their future options and future mobility and changing their friends and consumption patterns, and perhaps their ideas.

[INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AS SELF-FORMATION]

The process 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. Communications are difficult. Learning curves are steep and often incomplete. Students find themselves pulled between on one hand cultural flexibility, on the other cultural uncertainty and confusion. By no means all international students are models of agency freedom. Not all achieve full confidence. Some 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. Some international students are personally isolated and face a struggle to survive. The international student does

not command her or his own destiny, any more than the rest of us. Yet students do command their own identities. They can change whom they are. And they do.

An emphasis on active agency points to different observations and findings to those derived when positioning cross-border students in a stress and coping framework, with emphasis on dysfunction, as in much of the counselling literature. The self-formation perspective draws attention to the strategies used and decisions enacted by sojourning students, and the conditions in which self-formation takes place.

The self-formation of international students is distinctive, in being open, complex and highly reflexive. It is also historically grounded and subject to relations of power.

Self-formation is *open* because the trajectories of students are uncertain. The new cultural setting makes demands on international students they cannot know until they have lived them, and to which they must respond. Under new conditions people do new things.

Self-formation is *complex* because it entails more than one kind of project (for example it can include educational, occupational, familial, cultural and linguistic projects). It cannot be reduced to single set of indicators on a common scale.

Self-formation is also highly *reflexive* in that people consciously fashion themselves as they go, 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 first imagined. But they persist, reshaping their intentions as they go. They can identify and challenge their own assumptions and habits. They oscillate between pushing against what they see as their inadequacies, temporarily accepting the limitations, and thrusting forward again.

The self-formation of international students, like other persons, is *historically grounded* in that it is affected by the times and places in which it is located. Of course the international student self may be active in more than one place simultaneously, being linked by communications and media systems to home. Self-formation is shaped in all the student's institutions, professional environments, public places, activity groups and private settings. International students are shaped by cross-cultural encounters in the outside community and inside the classroom. Some non-white international students experience acts of discrimination or abuse that set limits on their potential for self-formation, discouraging integration in the host culture.

[STRATEGIES FOR SELF-FORMATION]

In sum, in the host country the cross-border student fashions herself or himself using both the identity resources she or he brings to the country of education, and the identity resources that she or he finds there.

When answering the question 'who am I', international students face more possibilities than other people. Most of us experience our immediate living environment as pre-given. International students must construct those living environments, in terms of physical infrastructures, where they live and their intimate

possessions; and social infrastructures, meaning their formal and informal relationships.

[GLOBE OF COLOURED LETTERS]

Here international education offers not just problems and barriers, but many opportunities for novel activities and personal growth. For example, the physical absence of many people with whom international students have close affective ties, notably the immediate family, and childhood friends, opens the way for selection of new friends. This regime enforces openness and risk. But there is also scope to arrange one's own cultural experiences, via the creation of new friends.

Many students do this explicitly. They talk about issues of cultural selection with each other. They have access not only to home and host cultures but also those of other international students, with whom it is usually easier to form engaged friendships than with local students. Other international students understand.

[STRATEGIES FOR SELF-FORMATION]

For all of us self-formation is a life-long process with many possibilities. But there are identifiable lines of strategy that we use. For most international students, who cross cultural as well as geographic borders, self-formation involves *cultural plurality*. Self-formation becomes a work of the imagination in which the possibilities are configured by coordinating more than one cultural set. This is often understood as choosing between, or mixing together, more than one possible identity.

For the most part, student self-formation amid cultural plurality is configured in one or both of two different ways. These two strategies for managing personal identity are often alluded to in the research literature in psychology and sociology, though various terms are used. I will call these two strategies *multiplicity* and *hybridity*.

[MULTIPLICITY]

First, multiplicity. In using a strategy of multiplicity, the sojourning student becomes more than one person living more than one life. It sounds like schizophrenia but it is not. It is not out of control. We all do it to some extent. We all have multiple connections, multiple settings in which we live our lives, home, family, locality, profession, arenas in which we are active, in one place and another. We move freely between one setting and the other. And, though we hardly notice, because it seems seamless, we are a somewhat different person each time. We focus on different things, we use different words, we may have different feelings and habits.

For international students from non-English speaking homes, often the fault line between the different selves is language of use. In an influential early review of the then literature on international students Austin Church argued that identity takes the form of an upper and lower layering, akin to the findings of an archaeological dig. The cross-border student maintains home country beliefs and practices in biographical domains such as family and marriage, religion, and—often but not always—national patriotism. The student layers over the top a set of new day-to-day ideas and

practices that facilitate human association in the host country. The student also develops a heightened sense of cultural relativism and greater reflexivity, a more conscious and deliberative approach to personal choices and identity formation. Other research talks of the student identity as oscillating between on one hand a heritage foundation, on the other hand acculturation in the host country.

Some cross-cultural psychology models this as a *journey* from home country identity to host country identity, a displaced 'coming home' in which home itself changes and the student becomes turned into something resembling a local, often after an agonizing inner conflict. But it is rarely a one-way journey. International students mostly retain large slabs of what they used to be. For most international students, cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation are not opposed to each other, not exactly. This brings us to the second strategy of self-formation: hybridity.

[HYBRIDITY]

Using a strategy of hybridity the international student combines and synthesizes different cultural and relational elements, blending them together, into a newly formed self. At the end of the student sojourn the student, rather than just flipping back into the old home country identity, takes home a transformed self.

Like multiplicity, hybridity is associated with a heightened awareness, reflexivity and sense of cultural relativism. Here international student identity exhibit ongoing movement, complexity and tension rather than endpoints and neat resolutions. It is important to international students to be *open* to the identity of others. But this process of mixing cultures is rarely balanced, symmetrical. And often the hybrid self varies in the way I talked of multiplicity—as the student moves between one life setting and another, the blend of identity changes. There is multiplicity in the hybrid.

This is what I meant when saying that both elements, multiplicity and hybridity can be present. To an extent each strategy needs the other. Without some hybridity, some blending into a new identity, multiple identities are experienced as fragmentation and/or contradiction. Without some multiplicity, there is a danger that the new hybrid person will lose their footing in the home country. The distinction between the two strategies is never absolute. There are continuous interactions between them.

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. This is what happens when migrants, temporary or permanent, are forced to give up their old sense of self when acquiring new values and habits. Here, self-determination is flattened, negated. This cuts off the possibility of multiple affiliation and self-managed hybridity.

[THE CENTERING SELF]

But it must be said that it needs a strong sense of self to manage strategies of multiplicity and hybridity. This takes us back to Amartya Sen's notion of agency freedom. This suggests an active, shaping and coordinating will, able to firmly sustain a changing sense of self while managing cultural plurality. I call this part of the person

the ‘centering self’. The centering self arbitrate tensions and conflicts between roles and values, between sites and between the expectations of different groups. The centering self propels the student into active social encounters with diverse others; keep self formation on track, changes course where needed and make hard choices. ‘Who am I?’ is the question. The centering self decides.

Much research into cross-cultural relations in international education, whether in cross-cultural psychology, or the socio-cultural studies which are less precise but often more explanatory, identifies this centering, coordinating will—by one or another name—as a key piece in the puzzle of personality. Researchers talk about ‘an internal locus of control’, or ‘a nexus of multi-membership’. Some focus directly on self-determination, or talk of students working as agents of their own change.

Here the centering self is not the singular, bounded individual imagined in traditional psychology, not the whole of the person in itself: identity with a capital ‘I’. It is a broadcasting and switching station not an operating system. The centering self is only one part of the self. But we can see that it is a crucial factor. Cross-cultural research identifies personal qualities that facilitate the centralizing functions of agency, including openness and directness in communication, the capacity to learn quickly, the capacity to initiate and respond. Flexibility. Critical thinking. Some international students cope especially well because they are especially conscious of their identity history and this facilitates reflexive self-formation. Others have the kind of empathy that enables them to enter the zone of another’s imagination, across cultural lines, and use their encounters with culturally diverse others to enhance their own cultural identity. Studies often find that international students learn to become more tolerant, to understand divergent points of view and to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty. They become more complex. They manage plural identities.

Many researchers argue that for international students, the necessary condition of the centering self is communicative competence, or ease in cross-cultural relationships, or both together. Research also suggests that the vice versa applies, as I noted earlier. Strong agency assists both language proficiency and cross-cultural relations.

[THREE PART DIAGRAM]

This three-part virtuous circle—in which agency, communicative competence and cross-cultural engagement are all advanced by each other, whether in pairs or all three together—recurs constantly in research findings.

However, this does *not* mean that students who lack full proficiency in English, like most students from East Asia and many from Southeast Asia, are doomed to weak agency, or no effective cross-cultural relations. Students often move forward on one of these elements—personal agency and initiative, communication, cross-cultural friendships—before the others are in place. Many students who struggle with the English language have nonetheless a remarkable self will. They must have, if they are to overcome the language barriers and social barriers, learn to communicate more effectively, learn the local systems, and deal with the slights and frustrations.

Exceptional personal drive is crucial to the success of many international students. Their sojourn taxes energy and imagination. But the students survive and eventually they prosper. This suggests a robust personality, not a fragile, almost helpless person, lost in the host country and in the throes of cultural conflict. Weak personalities are less likely to try international education, or to survive it. Even where international students are subordinated by ethnocentric practices that place them in deficit and make them feel small, their sense of self is strong enough to adapt to those practices, while managing their own emotional reactions to being stripped of status—and bring them through to the other end with a graduation certificate and personality intact.

[CONCLUSIONS]

How do the English-speaking higher education systems, such as ours, that educate nearly half of all the international students in the world, break decisively from ethnocentrism? In educating international students, it is neither desirable nor feasible to replace our Anglo-American educational norms with the values and practices of other education systems. Few cross-border students themselves want us to that. They have come for something different to the experience at home.

Rather, we need to think about international students in a different way. We need to give them dignity as persons with equal standing and rights with ourselves. We need to go further than that. We need to empathize with the Other, without forcing the Other to be the same as Us.

[HANDS JOINED TOGETHER]

We need to put ourselves in their shoes and learn from who they are and might become. We need to move from a perspective external to international students, to one grounded in those students as self-determining agents. We need to understand their encounter with our English-speaking education system for what it is—not as a journey of conversion in which they must succeed by becoming Anglo-American-Australian, but as an ongoing cultural negotiation.

I am not talking down the need for services tailored to meet international students' specific needs. But rather than seeing these students as helpless persons in welfare deficit, only half human agents, the idea of self-formation highlights the need to strengthen the agency freedom of students, and its scope and resources. Expanding the space in which students are free of constraint and coercion, for example the arbitrary effects of authoritarian administration or discriminatory practice, augments their freedom as control. Enhancing the resources that facilitate agency, for example programs designed to augment communicative competence, or provide secure housing, augments their freedom as power in Amartya Sen's sense.

[GLOBE AGAINST BLACK BACKGROUND]

The notion of international education as self-formation gives substance to student-centred learning. But it goes well beyond the notion of the student as consumer in the marketplace that has become associated with that phrase. Investment in one's economic future is part of self-formation, and costs and benefits matter for full fee

paying international students. But career and income are rarely the whole of the personal transformation that international students seek. The idea of self-formation also has implications for the teacher. In defining international education as self-formation, the point is not that the student must do the learning, nor that learning is a 'co-production' of teacher and taught, though both these points apply. Rather the point is that teaching, like student services and institutional organization, should foster international students—and their histories, identities, perspectives, learning practices and decisions—as worthy of equal respect.

Higher education as self-formation is both a normative ideal and a living reality. It can be observed empirically, in classrooms and in students' lives. Higher education is not always like that, but it does happen often enough for us to regret that it does not happen more. Here reflexive self-formation in education is like the larger project of forming democracy, of which it is one part. We know that agency-centred democratic practices exist. They are not an empty utopia. But there could be more and better democratic practices. Likewise, international students' control freedom and freedom as power could be enhanced. Institutions and teachers could build strong, conscious international student agency and work with it, rather than suborning, or coercing it.

At best international education becomes intercultural education in which self-forming individuals engage with each other with a cosmopolitan relational space criss-crossed by changing differences. They are open to each other and learn much from each other. The notion of higher education as self-formation also has a more general application to all students. The self-formation approach shifts attention from the economic consumption of student subjects to their agency freedom and mutual learning. It makes into an explicit object of strategies the fact that the student is formed jointly, by both herself or himself and those around. Here formal education is only one of the mirrors of reflexive conduct. Families, media, peer cultures, work and others are also part of self-formation. Higher education is distinctive in that its forms of reflexivity and self-managed growth entail knowledge and so especially potent.

[SIGN OFF SLIDE]

The paper has been theorisation pure and simple. I have not provides a critical review of the literature, or connected the argument to the empirical evidence, in my own and other studies, that has informed it. But the ideas *have* been tested in the real world. What sealed the argument for me, the argument about self-formation, was that when I discussed the idea in seminars with East and Southeast Asian international students, the common response of those student was the shock of unexpected recognition. 'Yes, that's it!' they said. 'That's who I am! Yes, that's what I am doing here.'