**A Theory of Student Agency in Higher Education**

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# **Abstract**

This chapter proposes a theory of student agency in higher education as an overarching framework for structuring ideas about conditions of student experiences and student outcomes in higher education. Student agency is defined as students’ capabilities to navigate and influence their learning and education pathways and environments. The STUDENTAGENCY model accounts for time, space and place dynamics to explain the double “conversion”: the conversion of agentic orientations into a set of capabilities that comprise student agency, and conversion of student agency into student experiences and outcomes. It expounds on the proposition that student agency is both a condition for students’ self-formation and an outcome of it (Klemenčič 2015a). The theory of student agency shifts attention from institutional structures and processes, and student engagement with these, to students’ capabilities, such as intentionality, forethought, self-regulation and reflexivity, self-awareness and self-efficacy guiding student interactions and engagements that build their experiences and result in outcomes. The chapter is guided by three questions: (1) What is student agency and what are student outcomes of higher education? (2) What are the student agency dynamics across, time, space, and place in higher education (and in transnational higher education cooperation)? (3) How does student agency affect student outcomes?

# **Introduction**

Student agency is becoming a central concept in educational policy and practice. It is widely conceived as a policy objective and as a condition for student success. OECD (2019, 2) uses the concept of student agency as a foundational concept to the OECD Learning Compass 2030 ‘rooted in the principle that students have the ability and the will to positively influence their own lives and the world around them’ and defines student agency as ‘the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change’. The European Strategy for Universities (European Commission 2022) sets important objectives linked to student agency. Furthermore, the student-centered learning and teaching advocated by the Commission as an overarching approach in designing higher education processes is ‘founded on the concept of student agency’ as ‘the element that is exclusive to and inherent in the student-centered learning and teaching paradigm’ (European Commission 2020, 8). Yet, despite the higher education policies embracing the concept of student agency, student agency is poorly understood, under-theorized and empirically under-researched (Stenalt & Lassesen 2021; Marín, de Benito & Darder 2020; Jääskelä et al 2020a, b; Jääskelä et al 2016). In a recent first comprehensive review of literature on student agency, Stenalt & Lassesen (2021, 11) conclude that ‘more attention to the construct is needed’.

This chapter proposes a theory of student agency in higher education as an overarching framework for structuring ideas about conditions of student experiences and student achievement in higher education. It is guided by three questions: (1) What is student agency and what are student outcomes of higher education? (2) What are the student agency dynamics across, time, space, and place in higher education (and in the context of transnational higher education cooperation)? (3) How does student agency affect student outcomes? The chapter presents the STUDENTAGENCY model which accounts for time, space and place dynamics to explain the double “conversion” of agentic orientations in interplay with agentic possibilities into a set of valuable capabilities for student experiences and outcomes. The theory of student agency shifts attention from institutional structures and processes, and student engagement with these, to students’ capabilities, such as intentionality, forethought, self-regulation and reflexivity, self-awareness and self-efficacy guiding student interactions and engagements that build their experiences and result in outcomes. In other words, the theory of student agency seeks to explain the students’ self-formation in higher education; indeed, self-formation as a primary purpose of higher education, as argued by Marginson (2014, 2018, forthcoming). It expounds on the proposition that student agency is both a condition for students’ self-formation and an outcome of it (Klemenčič 2015a).

That student engagement in educationally purposeful activities has effects on student experiences and outcomes in higher education is well demonstrated in research. The entire field of inquiry on “college effects on students” is devoted to the question how higher education processes and structures impact student outcomes, such as student graduation rates or student employability. Yet, this scholarship tends to ignore that students also have agency which they enact towards their own learning and educational goals, their own “self-formation” or to bring about changes in their higher education environments or beyond. Such enactment of agency inevitably shapes students’ experiences in higher education, their pathways through higher education and ultimately their higher education outcomes.

In this chapter, student agency is defined as students’ capabilities to navigate and influence their learning and education pathways and environments (Klemenčič 2015a, b, 2017, 2018, 2020). Students inevitably have some degree of agency in a higher education context. Students have some degree of freedom to act, even if their autonomy is limited by rigid rules and regulations. The structures and processes within higher education institutions prompt students to take actions: to attend lectures, complete assignments, study for exams, borrow books from the library, etc. That is even the case in most authoritarian higher education systems and paternalistic types of higher education institutions. Students also have some agentic orientation, some will to act: they have goals or wishes for the future, they are drawn to some subjects more than others, they choose extracurricular activities or look for student jobs. However, the nature and degree of development of capabilities for intentional action in pursuit of personal or societal goals varies. These capabilities are conditioned by agentic opportunities that emerge from the external environment and agentic orientations that are internal responses of the student to the higher education environment.

Students also enact agency - individually, collectively or through proxies - towards changes in higher educational environments (i.e., institutional changes) or towards changes in society (i.e., social changes). In the case of instigating institutional changes, students’ objective is to transform situational constraints and opportunities for agency achievement. They are enacting agency to create new opportunities or overcome barriers or to strengthen their own capabilities that will enable them to achieve the desired self-formation goals. In the case of social changes, students goals are in agency achievement for general (societal) wellbeing (cf. Sen 1984) as a precondition for agency achievement in other areas of functioning, such as for self-formation in higher education. Parallel to and based on the theory of student agency, I have developed a theory of student impact on higher education which seeks to explain the overarching mechanisms of students’ effects on higher education while recognizing that such enactments of agency can also result in students’ self-formation, possibly even at an accelerated rate (Klemenčič forthcoming).

The chapter first reviews literature relevant to our understanding of student agency in higher education. This section is in conversation with the scholarly literature on college impact on students, on “valuable capabilities” for student self-formation and on student agency in higher education. The main section is devoted to the presentation of the theory of student agency. The conclusions discusses the broader implications of the theory of student agency for our understanding of the purposes of higher education.

# Review of literature

Why do some students have positive experiences of higher education and others not? Why do some students succeed and others drop out from higher education? Literature on college impact on students, on “valuable capabilities” for student self-formation and explicitly on student agency have explored the factors shaping student experiences and student outcomes in higher education.

## Literature on the “college effects on students”

Much of research in sociology of higher education has focused on students’ college outcomes as a function of the characteristics of institutions and of their educational programs. Next to study of inequality this is the largest field of inquiry in sociology of higher education. This field is concerned with identifying causal linkages between various aspects of the college environment, student experiences and student outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Kuh 2009; Mayhew et al 2016). Several notable theories emerged in this body of literature.

The Model of the Dropout Process developed by Spady (1971) considers sociological aspects of students’ academic and social integration – “normative congruence” - as explanatory factors in the dropout process. Spady (1971, 39) suggests that ‘the concept of normative congruence refers to the general degree of compatibility between the dispositions, interests, attitudes, and expectations of the student and the set of behaviors, expectations, and demands to which he may be exposed as the result of interaction with a variety of individuals in the college environment’. Tinto’s retention model (1975) also posits that interactions alone in social and academic communities do not guarantee persistence of students; some degree of social and academic integration of students into their college environments must exist. This model highlights the students’ personal “input factors”: family background, pre-college schooling and individual attributes which define students’ goal commitments. Through interactions with academic and social structures students then achieve academic and social integration both of which are equally important for students’ persistence in college. Finally, the influential Astin’s (1984) involvement theory submits that student success in college depends on student involvement. Student involvement refers ‘to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience’ (Astin 1984, 518). In other words, the extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains.

The emphasis of these theories on students’ interactions and engagements in the higher education context is important. Naturally, it is through the interactions with people in the higher education context and engagements in various activities offered by higher education institutions that students form their experiences and achieve outcomes. But merely the frequency, duration and objectives of these interactions and engagements, does not offer a satisfactory explanation of why some students do better than others, even if control for their background and personality characteristics. The quality of student interactions and engagements in higher education contexts (Biesta & Tedder 2006, 2007; Biesta & Robinson 2015; Biesta 2010) which is conditioned by students entering into these engagements with the aforementioned capabilities, such as intentionality, forethought, self-regulation and reflexivity, self-awareness and self-efficacy, is much less convincingly accounted for in the existing theories (see also Kahu (2013) for important development of the concept student engagement). Most of research stemming from these theoretical models does not address the question of how students make meaning of the possibilities and resources available to them in higher education environment and how they formulate their life narratives which, as suggested by Biesta and Tedder (2007, 132), can be an important vehicle for learning about one’s agentic orientations.

Also, studies that focus merely on diversity of student backgrounds as a factor determining differential student outcomes are important but incomplete. A considerable body of research highlights educational inequalities in access to and attainment of higher education, whereby first generation, lower socio-economic status, and working students are considered more high-risk for dropping out and for lower educational outcomes (Stevenson 2012; Hurtado and Ruiz 2012; Hurtado et al 2012; Perna 2005; Pascarella et al 2004; Gurin et al 2002). However, underprivileged students can and often do achieve their educational goals despite the challenges encountered. In fact, high-achieving underprivileged students demonstrate remarkable capabilities to navigate and influence their learning and education pathways and environments, i.e., remarkable agency towards self-formation reinforcing their resilience and persistence. At the same time, students from affluent backgrounds can fail academically. Thus, student background is not a defining factor of student, even if it can have significant effects on students’ educational trajectories.

This chapter argues that we need a comprehensive theoretical framework that addresses not only what agentic orientations student have, what agentic opportunities and resources they perceive, and what the relationships between student agency and outcome are, but also how they construct ideas about their “possible future selves” (Leondari 2007; Clegg and Bufton 2008; Clegg 2010; Stevenson & Clegg 2011), how their background conditions these projections (Ball et al 2002; Reay et al 2005; Reay et al 2010; Stevenson & Clegg 2011; Burke, Scurry & Blenkinsopp 2020), and why and how they choose their engagements in curricular, extracurricular and employment activities (Clegg & Bradley 2006; Clegg & Bufton 2008; Clegg, Stevenson & Willott 2010; Bennett, Knight & Bell 2020; Griffiths et al 2021). Accounting for the student capabilities that define the quality of student engagements in higher education and ultimately shape student experiences and outcomes is crucial for all students but especially for exploring inclusion and success of a underprivileged and vulnerable groups of students (Gurin et al 2002; Ball et al 2002; Reay et al. 2005, 2010).

## Literature on student capabilities

A separate strand of research in educational psychology has explored different capabilities shown as relevant for student experiences and outcomes in higher education.

Bandura (1986, 1997, 2001, 2005) places personal self-efficacy beliefs as a necessary condition of human agency and defines it as individuals’ belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce desired results. According to Bandura (2005, p. 3), ‘[t]his core belief is the foundation of human motivation, well-being, and accomplishments. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties’. Bandura (2005, p. 3) also suggests that human agency is demonstrated through intentionality (forming intentions with action plans and strategies), forethought (setting goals and anticipating likely outcomes of actions), self-regulation (reflection, monitoring and regulating strategies) and self-awareness (self-examining of own functioning and to understand own values and beliefs). These capabilities figure in several other models of capabilities that enhance student learning and other student outcomes in higher education.

One notable such model is the self-regulated learning model (Zimmermann 2002, 2008). Self-regulated learning refers to processes such as goal setting, metacognition, and self-assessment, all of which are considered beneficial for student learning. The model emphasizes metacognitive skills which are necessary for students to take greater responsibility for their own learning and adopt their strategies for achieving learning goals (Zimmerman 2002, 2008). This model has been implemented in practice through “Personal Development Planning'' which prompts students to reflect on their own learning, performance and achievements, plan all-round personal, educational and career goals and record their own achievements (Clegg and Bradley 2006). Related concept to self-regulated learning is self-directed learning. Self-directed learning describes a process ‘...in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes’ (Knowles 1975, 8).

Another influential model relevant for understanding student agency is self-authorship. Baxter Magolda (2001, 269) defines self-authorship as ‘the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity and social relations’. This development of the internal belief system is a foundation for developing identities and relations with others, which in turn are a developmental foundation for advanced learning outcomes (Baxter Magolda 2007, 69). Another influential theory is self-determination theory which represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. The basic premise of this theory is that ‘people have basic psychological needs to experience competence, autonomy, and relatedness to others’ (Ryan et al 2021, 4). When these needs are fulfilled people are able to self-determine, that is to organize their experiences and regulate motivation for action (Ryan et al 2021; Deci and Ryan 2017).

In recent years, the concept of grit has been introduced to highlight the importance of non-cognitive factors for personal achievement (Duckworth et al. 2007). The development of this concept was motivated by the observations - common also to other models - that in many cases individuals of an equal or lesser IQ were outperforming more intelligent individuals, including in education contexts (Duckworth et al. 2007). Duckworth et al (2007, 1087) define grit as passion and perseverance, i.e., intensity, direction, and duration of one’s exertions towards long-term goals. The students’ traits and characteristics that define grit, mental wellbeing and resilience figure also in several higher education studies of capabilities associated with student success and academic performance.

What these models have in common is to suggest that cognitive abilities alone are not a good predictor of student academic achievement. Other non-cognitive factors that empower students’ to take control over their learning and education have been shown to play a significant role in students’ achievement. This happens, as Bandura (2005, p. 3) suggests, through intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, self-awareness and sense of self-efficacy. I refer to these “non-cognitive factors” as students’ capabilities to navigate and influence their learning and education pathways and environments. This chapter proposes that these capabilities are distinct, but related, features of student agency. These capabilities affect the quality of interactions and engagements students have with various educationally purposeful activities, which in turn affect their experiences in higher education and their educational outcomes. Despite existing research and instruments to measure these different capabilities*,* there exists no comprehensive theoretical framework that would connect these different capabilities of student agency with student engagement and ultimately student experiences, pathways, and outcomes in higher education. This is what the theory of student agency aims to do.

## Literature on student agency

Scholars tend to agree that higher education research lacks a comprehensive theory of agency, and especially a well-developed theory of the interplay between structure and agency (Ashwin 2009; Gumport 2012). Research on colleges and universities as organizations is mostly concerned with organizational structures determining human agency (Gumport 2012). However, there is exciting new research on student agency emerging. Stenalt and Lassesen (2021) offer a timely systematic review of higher education research on student agency and its relations to students’ learning. Most of the research explores relations between student agency and individual student outcomes, but studies exploring the relationship between agency and societal outcomes are underdeveloped (ibid.). Much of this literature draws on the classical social science research on agency-structure and human action (Giddens 1984; Archer 1995, 2000, 2003; Bandura 1986, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Bourdieu 1998). Some student agency research has also been inspired by the “capabilities approach” introduced by Sen (1985, 1992, 1999, 2009) and further developed by Nussbaum (2005a, b, 2006, 2010, 2011).

Notable research by educational researchers covers student agency as part of learning analytics research (Jääskelä et al 2020a,b; Jääskelä et al 2017; Heilala et al 2020a,b; Luo et al 2019; Liponen & Kumpolainen 2011). At Finnish Institute for Educational Research at University of Jyväskylä, researchers have developed the Agency of University Students (AUS) Scale as part of a learning analytics research agenda to offer ‘a novel methodological contributions by examining individual, relational and participatory resources of agency in the course context’ (Jääskelä et al 2020a: 2; Jääskelä et al 2016). Furthermore, educational researchers and sociologists explore student agency in the context of students’ transformative engagement with knowledge (Ashwin 2020; Ashwin et al 2014; Ashwin 2009; Klemenčič 2020). Inspired by Simon Marginson’s work (2014, 2018, forthcoming) and under his guidance, several researchers explore the concept of “higher education as self-formation”, including students' reflexive agency in academic self-formation (Lee 2021), and students’ employability agency (Pham 2021).

Finally, there exists ample literature on student voice in higher education and students-as-partners education (Fielding 2001, 2004; Cook-Sather 2006; Bovill, Cook-Sather & Fellen 2011; Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz 2015; Cook-Sather et al. 2018; Matthews 2017; Matthews et al 2018a,b,c; Klemenčič 2015a, 2018, 2020). This literature speaks to the enactment of student agency for purposes of changing the educational processes and structures. This scholarship affirms the propositions by agency theorists such as Archer (1995, 2000, 2003) and Giddens (1984) that not only structures have effects on agents, but that agents – students as agents also have effects on processes and structures within the higher education institutions.

# **A theory of student agency**

Student agency is central to our understanding of student experiences and student outcomes in higher education. This chapter proposes a comprehensive theory of student agency that accounts for time, space and place dynamics and explains student experiences, pathways, and outcomes through the lens of student agency. The theory of student agency shifts attention from institutional structures and processes, and student engagement with these structures, to students’ capabilities and how students navigate and influence their learning and education pathways and environments. In other words, it highlights the importance of students’ capabilities such intentionality, forethought, self-regulation and reflexivity, self-awareness and self-efficacy (Bandura 2005). This is to address the notable fragmentation of approaches conceptualizing the conditions of student success in higher education, and to integrate these approaches into an overarching theoretical framework. The development of a theory of student agency is guided by three questions: (1) What is student agency and what are student outcomes of higher education? (2) What are the student agency dynamics across, time, space, and place in higher education (and in the context of transnational higher education cooperation)? (3) How does student agency affect student outcomes?

In my earlier work, I suggest that student agency is premised on agentic possibilities and agentic orientations (Klemenčič 2015a, b, 2017, 2018, 2020). Students’ agentic possibilities are positive freedoms and opportunities within higher education or broader societal ecosystems for students to do and to be what they have reason to value (cf. Sen 1985, 1992, 1999, 2009). These reflect also negative freedoms derived from student rights and responsibilities. These negative freedoms condition students’ autonomy, i.e., as a freedom to act, think and be. Student autonomy implies (the degree) that students’ behavior is experienced as willingly enacted. Students’ agentic possibilities are exogenously given – they originate outside the individual.

Students’ agentic orientations reflect human diversity along a range of variables, such as gender, personality traits, cognitive abilities and intellectual dispositions, prior academic achievement, socio-economic background. These are endogenously constructed – they represent students’ internal responses to external state of affairs. Students’ will to enactment of agency for a set goal is derived from these background characteristics and a specific lens through which students interpret their own role in the given social situation or setting and acceptable ways of behavior including performing routine tasks. This is what Bourdieu (1984, 1988, 1996) refers to as “habitus”. Socio-economic background (class), parents’ education, prior educational background (how selective was the high school), immigrant status and gender can serve as filters for analyzing students’ perceptions of their own role and expected pathways through higher education. Swidler (1987, 280-284) highlights the importance of cultural repertoires that help individuals navigate their social contexts, make decisions about their actions and make predictions about the future. She refers to individuals’ “toolkits for action” as a “set of knowledge, skills and symbols which provide the materials from which individuals and groups construct strategies of action”. In sum, student agentic orientations are “the baggage” that students brings along when entering higher education and that guide their initial choices and actions. These orientations inevitably develop in studentship through interactions with and within the higher education environment.

Agentic possibilities and orientations are temporally embedded, implying that they are shaped through considerations of past habits of mind and action, present judgments of alternatives for action, and projections of the future (Emirbayer & Mische 1998). They are also intrinsically relational and social, and situated in structural, cultural, and socio-economic-political contexts of action (“space” and “place”). This conceptualization of student agency is the basis for a comprehensive theory of student agency to explain relations between student agentic capabilities and student outcomes, while accounting for time, space, and place dynamics. This is to offer deeper social scientific understanding of educational processes and outcomes in higher education.

The theory of student agency has two premises. First, it seeks to explain the “conversion” of agentic orientations in engagement with the academic and social structures (offering agentic possibilities and resources) into a set of capabilities that comprise student agency. Second, the theory of student agency captures the conversion of these agentic capabilities in engagement with the structures into student experiences, pathways, and outcomes. Accordingly, the student agency theoretical model, as depicted in Figure 1 below, has two analytical domains: (1) conversion of agentic orientations (habitus, dispositions, traits, gender) in interplay with “structures” into a set of capabilities comprising student agency; and (2) conversion of student agency (as a set of capabilities) in interplay with “structures” into student experiences and outcomes. Importantly, this processes of conversion are neither linear nor deterministic. Achieving certain student outcomes, such as for example successfully completing a course, can feed back into the agentic capabilities, for example, by consolidating the forethought for a particular course of study or profession and or consolidating sense of self-efficacy (through the acquired competence) and of affirming capabilities for self-regulation. Furthermore, the model does not presupposes a necessarily progressive development of student agency: student capabilities can also be unchanged or contracted in these processes of conversion.

Figure 1: The STUDENTAGENCY model (developed by the author)



Such an integrated framework allows us to single-out specific variables and to measure relationships between these variables while also depict the overarching mechanism of relations between students’ agentic orientations in interplay with agentic possibilities and student experiences and outcomes. Following Sen's capability approach (Sen 1985, 1992, 1999, 2009), the proposition here is that evaluations of social arrangements in the context of higher education processes, as they relate to student outcomes and experiences in higher education, be undertaken by focusing on student agency as a set of valuable capabilities. Central to the methodological framework is the concept of student agency as *a multidimensional, dynamic, and socio-structurally and relationally conditioned concept*.

### Student agency as a multidimensional, dynamic, and socio-structurally and relationally conditioned concept

First, student agency is *a multidimensional concept*. It consists of *a set of capabilities*. We do not yet have a comprehensive list of “valuable” capabilities that comprise student agency in higher education. Which capabilities are “valuable” capabilities comprising student agency requires both substantive and valuational judgements. As discussed earlier, several “valuable” capabilities have been identified in research, such as self-regulation (Zimmerman 2002, 2008; Clegg and Bradley 2006), self-direction (Knowles 1975), self-determination (Deci & Ryan 2000, 2019), self-efficacy (Bandura 1986, 1997, 2001, 2005) and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda 2001, 2007, 2008). However, to both revise and create a more holistic list of student functional capabilities, empirical research based on grounded theory is needed to test the existing capabilities and or discover any previously overlooked capabilities that have effects on student experiences and outcomes. Similarly, which student outcomes are desirable also requires both substantive and valuational judgement. Desired student outcomes are listed in government policies and reflected in institutional missions. New expected higher education outcomes are emerging, such as equipping students with digital and green skills (European Commission 2022). Again, a grounded theory approach in empirical research can help define the range of expected student outcomes, including some less often accounted for in higher education research, such as mental wellbeing (Baik et al 2019), general wellbeing (Ryff 1989) or life satisfaction (Cummins 1996).

Second, the STUDENTAGENCY model presumes a *dynamic, developmental nature* of student agency. Agency is not something students possess once and for all but rather capabilities that they can develop from their agentic orientations in interaction with “structures”. In other words, higher education institutions can create conditions for students’ developing valuable capabilities and or they can purposefully target development of capabilities as an expected student outcome. To capture this dynamic, developmental nature of student agency, empirical research based on the student agency theory should ideally adopt a fully longitudinal, fully mixed methods approach informed by the capabilities approach (Comim 2008) to capture how students make sense of changes in their capabilities over time and time projections of future life plans. *Timescapes perspective* (Neale et al 2012) can add important additional insights to such research by capturing students’ perceptions of “time structures”, how they navigate these, and if and how they challenge these. This is to explore the construction and regularization of time as a means of social coordination of student agency, students’ sense of control over their time, and timing, tempo and rhythm of the activities they choose to engage in (Neale et al. 2012). Equally important to explore are the everyday and mundane activities and their significance for student agency (Clegg 2005).

Third, student agency is *socio-structurally and relationally conditioned.* Student agency is in continuous interplay with structures of academic and social life within higher education institutions: students’ capabilities can be extended or constrained by these structures, and students also – by enacting their agency – can have effects on these structures and processes. The focus here is on structures of academic and social life on campus that enable persistent patterns of behavior and interactions within higher education institutions (Hurtado 2007, 99-100) and as such have “treatment effects” on student outcomes. These social structures include (Hurtado 2007): (1) formal academic context, (2) informal academic environment, (3) formal social context, including structural features of higher education institutions, and (4) informal social context. Formal academic structures include institutional rules and procedures recorded in statutory documents and policies concerning institutional mission, study programs, student rights and responsibilities, etc. Informal academic structures are often referred to as the “hidden curriculum”, i.e., implicit rules that govern academic life. Formal social structures refer to structural features of colleges such as institutional size, residences, student organizations, etc. Finally, informal social structures include peer groups, social nature of student behavior and interactions, such as personal friendship groups.

To capture this socio-structurally and relationally conditioned nature of student agency, empirical research based on the student agency theory should ideally be conducted in an inter-institutional, international comparative and disciplinary comparative perspective. In other words, it should capture the “place” and “space” perspectives in research on student agency.

The “place perspective” in STUDENTAGENCY model recognizes the diversity of higher education institutions and their structural features, as well as the diversity in disciplinary practices within the same higher education institutions. These inter-institutional and inter-disciplinary differences are reflected in institutional cultural scripts that inform students’ perceived repertoires for action – cultural schemes that students internalize and on the basis of which they develop preferences, expectations, behavior – an understanding of how to be a student in that university/college. As suggested by Swidler (1986: 273), culture does not influence action by simply prescribing values or end goals; instead, it provides a “toolkit” of skills, habits, rituals, and views that enable individuals to navigate various situations and scenarios.

Higher education institutions as social institutions (as “places”) are embedded within a broader cultural and political context of higher education “space”. The concept of “space” offers a particular analytical lens to study the interconnectivity between student agency and broader cultural and political scripts captured in, for example, government policies but also in implicit understandings by policy makers and higher education stakeholders of student agency, higher education processes and structures, and desired student outcomes (Brooks 2021). Particularly important for research on student agency is to capture the cultural understandings of student-teacher and student-higher education institution relationships, as well as the cultural understanding of student freedom to learn *(“Lehrnfreiheit”).* The “space perspective” in STUDENTAGENCY model focuses on cultural scripts and higher education policies related to student agency and student outcomes in higher education, but also explores whether and how students shape these cultural and political scripts. A promising new approach here is “method with place” to explore the interplay between student agency and the emerging new structures in transnational higher education and student mobilities.

# Conclusion

Some of the persistent questions in history of social thought has been how societies maintain the wellbeing of their individuals and what makes societies successful. In a book on successful societies, Hall and Lamont (2009, 2) define a successful society as ‘one that enhances the capabilities of people to pursue the goals important to their own lives, whether through individual or collective action’. This definition originates from the liberal values of modern Western societies in which agentic individuals – their choices and capabilities – are seen as central to political democracy, open market economy and cultural freedom (Bromley et al. 2011 cited in Klemenčič 2018). If we accept this normative definition of successful societies then education can be considered one of the prime social institutions to contribute to the development of successful societies. Education institutions are uniquely placed to help students develop agentic capabilities, that is the capabilities, as posited by Hall and Lamont, to pursue the goals important to them during their education journey and beyond.

If, as Marginson (2014, 2018, forthcoming) suggests, a core purpose of higher education is students’ self-formation, than student agency is both a condition for students’ self-formation and an outcome of it (Klemenčič 2015a: 17). Such a conception of “higher education as students’ self-formation” challenges the utilitarian notions of higher education in service to society and economy. It also changes the theoretical construct of student agency as merely a condition for society-serving student outcomes to something that can be developed as part of students’ self-formation.

The capabilities approach (Sen 1999), on which the theory of student agency builds, submits that freedom to achieve wellbeing, which is of primary moral importance, is to be understood in terms of people’s capabilities as real opportunities to do and to be what they reason to value. The capabilities approach enables us to explore and expand our understanding of human flourishing (Drèze & Sen 2013; Walker & McLean 2013). Similarly, the theory of student agency, built on the notion of student agency as capabilities, expands our understanding of the role of higher education in promoting student flourishing in higher education and beyond (Kahn 2017; Wilson-Strydom & Walker 2015).

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