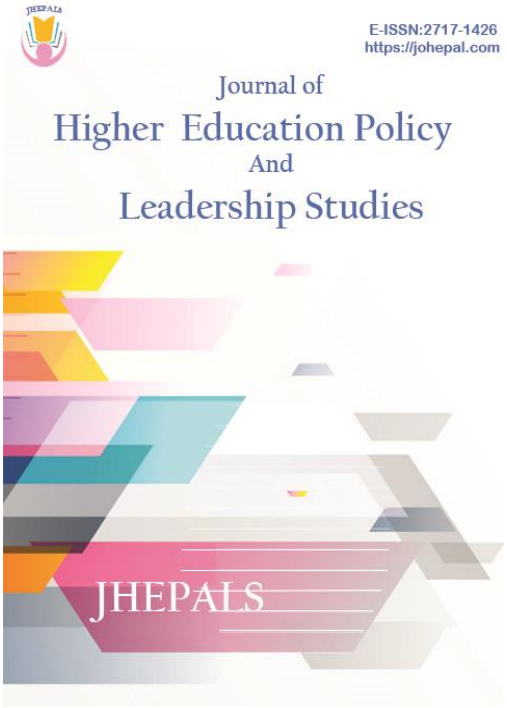
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Book Review: The Marginalised Majority in Higher Education: Marginalised Groups and the Barriers They Face

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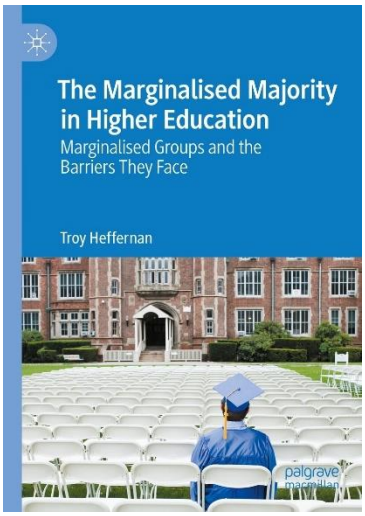
Book Review

The Marginalised Majority in Higher Education: Marginalised Groups and the Barriers They Face

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Troy Heffernan's book provides an in-depth and compelling look at the challenges faced by higher education's marginalized individuals (students and academics) in the form of barriers to accessing resources and opportunities, discrimination in recruitment and promotion, and the prevalence of social networks perpetuating existing inequalities. Even though universities are now accessible to people marginalized based on race, gender, sexual identity, disability, class, and other characteristics, the success or failure of their careers will be primarily determined by the existence of "privilege" in their hands. This book offers a reflection on the evolution of the higher education sector and the gaping disparities that

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remain an obstacle to the success of marginalized groups. Heffernan carefully acknowledges the progress made regarding inclusivity and diversity in academia while highlighting the exclusionary power structures that remain systemic barriers that further exacerbate inequality. The author successfully presents an in-depth analysis of various forms of marginalization that exist based on differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and the disabilities inherent in each individual. This book explains in detail how higher education institutions often fail to meet the needs of diverse communities and suggests strategies for creating more inclusive and supportive environments. Appropriate policy interventions can play a crucial role in changing the landscape of higher education. However, these interventions must be supported by active participation from all stakeholders in creating meaningful and sustainable change. In his analysis, Heffernan accentuates marginalized groups' challenges and explores these individuals' extraordinary potential and contributions when given equal opportunities.

Heartbreaking Personal Narratives

One of the book's most compelling aspects is its use of personal narrative, including the author's experiences as a blind student navigating college in the early 2000s. Heffernan (2023) uses his stories to illustrate the inadequacy of existing support structures and the transformative potential of more adaptive learning options. These narratives effectively humanize the challenges faced by marginalized individuals and provide valuable insight into the complexity of their experiences. Such traces of life enrich the analytical presentation and provide a deep emotional dimension that allows readers to understand marginalized groups' bitter struggles better.

Heffernan's life episode as a blind student shows how a lack of physical and technological accessibility can hinder the learning process and how innovation in educational technology can open up new opportunities. The book also covers several heartbreaking stories of students and academics from various backgrounds who continue to fail to overcome significant obstacles to achieve their academic and professional success.

Marginalized groups in higher education, even though they are often the majority in number, still experience various complex and layered forms of marginalization. One prominent form is a lack of support services and inadequate representation. People with disabilities have always been victims of such a lack at universities. These groups are poorly represented in higher education institutions' leadership roles and strategic decision-making positions. Their voices and needs are often not heard or even deliberately ignored, resulting in policies and institutional practices that are not fully inclusive or fair. In addition, they face limited access to essential resources that can support their academic and professional success, such as scholarships, research funding, academic support, and professional networks. These resources are more easily accessible to socially and economically "privileged" groups but create additional barriers for marginalized groups, who must try harder to obtain the same resources.

Discrimination and microaggressions are also part of their everyday experiences. They often have to face direct discrimination and microaggressions that are subtle but have a significant impact on other students, lecturers, colleagues, and the structure of the institution itself. Examples of these microaggressions could be derogatory comments, unfair treatment, or unconscious bias that creates an unsupportive environment. Pressure to

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assimilate to dominant norms and culture in institutions is another significant form of marginalization. Students and academics from marginalized groups often feel the need to conform to standards that do not value or acknowledge their unique identities and experiences. This pressure can lead to discomfort and isolation, hindering full participation in academic life.

Systemic barriers play a significant role in this group's marginalization. Admissions rules, decision-making policies, and evaluation practices are frequently designed with biased assumptions against more advantaged groups. These barriers create profound gaps between marginalized and dominant groups regarding academic achievement and career advancement. Marginalized academics are deliberately burdened with completing purely administrative tasks so that their attention is diverted from research-focused roles, which hinders their career progress and contribution to their respective fields of expertise.

Awareness of Inclusion and Equity Gaps

The book critically examines the gap between inclusion and equality, emphasizing the need for systemic change to address study completion rates, academic achievement, and career advancement among marginalized groups. The author deeply dives into the intersectionality of marginalized identities, recognizing that individuals can face a variety of barriers based on differences in race, gender, disability, and social class. Inclusion is only enough if it is accompanied by genuine efforts to achieve equality, where every individual, regardless of background, has the same opportunity to succeed.

Heffernan describes how these disparities are often visible in academic statistics and the everyday experiences of marginalized students and academics. Despite efforts to increase diversity on campus, individuals from minority groups often still feel unwelcome or not fully valued. He highlights the importance of creating a truly inclusive campus culture where every voice is heard and valued. The author also emphasizes that equality cannot be achieved only through temporary policies or programs, as it requires profound cultural change and long-term commitment from all parties involved. Heffernan invites readers to reconsider existing assumptions and practices and constantly engage in constructive and ongoing dialogue about creating a more just and equal educational environment.

Bourdieu's Theory as an Analysis Tool

The use of Bourdieu's theory becomes a theoretical framework for the author's exploration of the wicked social problems that have haunted the journey of higher education. Bourdieu's theory is an essential framework for understanding power, privilege, and marginalization dynamics in higher education. Through the concepts of habitus, capital, and field, Heffernan highlights how social structures and hierarchies shape individual experiences and opportunities in academia. However, the author criticizes Bourdieu for focusing too much on class and gender, ignoring other dimensions such as race, sexual orientation, and disability. Heffernan then offers a contextualization of individual experiences within broader social structures, complementing the relevance of Bourdieu's theory in examining social inequality in higher education.

Pierre Bourdieu, a foremost French sociologist, developed a theory that explains how various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) influence an individual's position and mobility in the social environment (Reed-Danahay, 2020). In the context of

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higher education, the theory is valuable for analyzing how access to specific resources can influence a person's educational and career outcomes. Heffernan uses this framework to highlight that education not only transfers knowledge but also reproduces existing social structures.

A primary concept in Bourdieu's theory is habitus, a system of dispositions formed by social and economic conditions that shape individual actions, perceptions, and attitudes. Heffernan explains how habitus influences the interaction between marginalized groups and their academic environment. Students from lower economic backgrounds may feel uncomfortable or disenfranchised in a university environment dominated by those with higher cultural and social capital. It can lead to feelings of inferiority and isolation that negatively impact their academic performance.

Capital is another essential element in Heffernan's analysis. Cultural, social, and economic capital all play a role in determining who can succeed in academia. Students and academics from marginalized groups often need more access to these forms of capital, which hinders their opportunities for success. Students from families without a higher education background certainly need more cultural capital to navigate academic bureaucracy or understand the unwritten norms of the academic world.

Bourdieu's concept of the field, which refers to the social arena in which individuals and groups struggle to gain power and resources, is also highly relevant. Heffernan uses this concept to outline how institutions of higher education function as fields where dynamics of power and struggle take place. Those with more capital have a significant advantage in this field, while those on the margins must fight harder for equal recognition and opportunities. There needs to be structural change that allows for the redistribution of capital and fairer access to resources to achieve true inclusion and equality.

Heffernan further combines the concept of intersectionality with Bourdieu's theory to examine how various aspects of identity (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability) interact with capital to influence individual experiences and opportunities. A Black female college student with a disability, for instance, inevitably faces more significant challenges than their peers who share only one or two of those identities. Using an intersectionality framework, Heffernan shows that more than a one-size-fits-all approach is needed to address the diversity of experiences and barriers marginalized groups face.

Practical Recommendations for Handling Marginalization

Heffernan offers practical strategies for creating social inclusion and addressing marginalization in higher education institutions. He emphasizes the significance of structural reforms and inclusive policies, such as revising admissions policies to be more equitable, providing support services for marginalized groups, and increasing financial aid for disadvantaged students. Anti-discrimination policies should be enforced with clear reporting mechanisms and strong sanctions.

Changes to curriculum and pedagogy are also critical, emphasizing diverse perspectives and ensuring the representation of marginalized groups. Flexible learning methods should be encouraged to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Campus facilities, both physical and digital, must be accessible to all using universal design principles, and assistive technology and mental health services should be provided.

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Addressing gender inequality is another essential step. Institutions should implement policies that support work-life balance for women in academia, such as flexible schedules, childcare services, and paid parental leave. Universities must also increase the representation of women in leadership positions through mentoring programs and targeted recruitment efforts.

In addition, Heffernan stressed the importance of combating racism and promoting racial equality, with a focus on recruiting and retaining students and academics from ethnic minority groups in leadership positions. Support for LGBTQ+ people must be reflected in health and rights protection policies, while socio-economic diversity should be strengthened through various programs that support students from low-income backgrounds.

The use of theoretical frameworks and analysis is also highlighted. Bourdieu's theories, such as habitus, capital, and field, can be applied to analyze and address power dynamics within academic institutions, promoting a deeper understanding of social inequality. Acknowledging and addressing the intersecting identities and multiple forms of oppression faced by marginalized individuals is critical to ensuring holistic and inclusive solutions.

In summary, Heffernan's book provides a comprehensive roadmap for making higher education more inclusive and equitable. By implementing these strategies, universities can work toward dismantling systemic barriers and creating an environment where all students and academics, regardless of their background or identity, can thrive freely.

Challenges of Understanding Book Content

Although this book offers a rich and in-depth analysis, readers will encounter challenges in understanding some complex theoretical concepts, especially concerning Bourdieu's theory. Concepts such as habitus, capital, and field require a broad understanding of social and cultural dynamics based on mastery of sociological theory or higher education. Bourdieu's theory, which is the basis for the analysis in Heffernan's book, is famous for its complexity due to the need for more rationality in his theory (Yang, 2014).

In the previous book, Heffernan (2022) also strictly emphasized that for readers who already know Bourdieu, his work offers detailed examples of the application of Bourdieu's theory to a sector as a whole, while for those who do not know Bourdieu, it functions as an introduction explaining how Bourdieu's theory can be applied in higher education and why Bourdieu's ideas are essential as a unique perspective for understanding the dynamics of modern university life.

To help readers overcome these challenges, Heffernan often links theoretical concepts with practical examples and real case studies. For example, he explains how habitus can influence how a student from a lower economic background feels intimidated in a university environment dominated by those with higher cultural capital. By connecting theory with concrete, everyday experience, readers can see the relevance and practical application of the concepts discussed. However, while this approach is helpful, readers still need extra effort to truly understand and internalize these concepts.

Overall, the challenge of understanding the content of this book is mainly related to the complexity of the theory used. Although Heffernan attempts to explain the concepts clearly and provide practical examples, readers will still need additional effort to understand fully. This book invites readers to go beyond surface understanding and truly delve into the

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socio-cultural dynamics that influence higher education. Thus, although challenging, this process will ultimately enrich the reader's understanding and provide deeper insight into the critical issues raised.

Towards a More Inclusive and Equal Future of Higher Education

Heffernan's book is a comprehensive work highlighting marginalized individuals' challenges in higher education and encouraging stakeholders to eliminate exclusive power structures embedded in a world of higher education oriented toward a more inclusive and equitable future for all. An in-depth exploration of the intersectional challenges facing marginalized individuals and a call for systemic change make the book essential for anyone interested in promoting diversity and inclusion in academia.

This book is required reading for anyone who cares about social justice issues in higher education, as it offers valuable insights and practical guidance for creating a truly inclusive environment where everyone has a fair chance to reach their full potential. It is a call for social justice and a tribute to the diversity and richness of the human experience in higher education. Heffernan's work becomes a powerful summon for us to recognize injustice in higher education and collaborate for a more just and inclusive future. It can guide academics, policymakers, and anyone who cares about realizing social justice in educational management. The author wants us all to contribute to creating a more just and inclusive academic world.

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