

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Marginalisation in Higher Education: Proposing a New Conceptual Model

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**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

**Abstract:** New marginalised communities are constantly emerging to demand fair access to higher education, while new forms and expressions of the *process* of marginalisation evolve. It is important to seek broader meaning-making to help us to understand the mechanisms of marginalisation and to better inform policy and practice; if we simply treat every marginalised community as unique and decontextualised, change will be piecemeal, precarious and transient. This final paper therefore aims to pull together the findings from the preceding three papers – plus other chapters in the book on which this symposium is based – as a stepping stone towards proposing a new four-dimensional conceptualisation of marginalisation in higher education: *by society, by systems, by time/space, and by relevance*. The paper will also suggest actions that policymakers, university managers and educators might take towards an inclusive future for higher education across the globe.

**Paper:** This symposium has been framed around a new book in the SRHE series entitled '*Marginalised Communities in Higher Education: Disadvantage, Mobility and Indigeneity*'. The first three papers in this symposium are drawn from among the twelve substantive chapters in the book, each of which explores a particular community that experiences one or more forms of marginalisation.

The purpose of this final paper is to build on this corpus of empirical work to propose a new overarching conceptualisation that helps us understand the macro-processes that lead to marginalisation and provide clues towards possible solutions. This process of theorisation is vital to bind together disparate narratives and avoid treating each community as *sui generis*, where bespoke efforts toward positive change are not – or cannot – be applied more widely, leading to fragmentary and fragile improvements. The proposed conceptualisation is four-dimensional:

- *Marginalisation by society*, where communities are forced to the edges of mainstream society by its purposeful actions or the consequences of socio-political decisions. The

processes by which this occurs are well-known: racist segregation laws, suppression of languages, forced movements, social persecution and criminalisation of traditional lifestyles. Others have been excluded more invidiously through policies that have *de facto* had a similar effect – e.g. the underfunding of schooling in certain locations. The legacy of these practices remains potent for affected communities, despite many now having strong legal protections and benefiting from government aid programmes. However, improvements in access to higher education are often slow to materialise, less due to a reluctance from these communities to take up the opportunities available, but more that the building of trust and belonging within an alien institution takes both time and resolute efforts.

- *Marginalisation by systems*, through the development of bureaucratic and technocratic infrastructures designed to cope with complexity on a massive scale – e.g. those used to manage university admissions, student support or degree results. These systems, which are often little more than historical evolutions of happenstance, make tacit assumptions and simplifications in order to allocate individuals into convenient boxes. Many were established explicitly to serve the needs of the majority, often to the detriment of others – bureaucracies are rarely neutral in the ways in which they treat the people interacting with them, with marginalised communities finding themselves needing workarounds or making repeated requests for special dispensations. Aside from the time-consuming and stressful nature of fighting against an established system, it gives a message to the individual and their community that they are different, inconvenient and potentially unwanted.
- *Marginalisation by time/space*, where there is a tacit assumption that students should be physically present at specific times and in specific spaces – and that they have an equal opportunity to do so. Classes are tightly timetabled to maximise the throughput of buildings, assessments have inflexible deadlines and the timed solo examination remains the norm. Indeed, time enjoys a privileged role in most societies and failure to meet expectations attracts stigma for being unproductive, unreliable or disrespectful. However, our time is constrained in highly individual ways and much of our day is hypothecated before we wake. Necessary tasks, including travel, will take some people longer than others, perhaps due to disability, caring or poverty. Marginalisation results where students are effectively excluded from the mainstream educational experience and forced into situations where they fall foul of university expectations or regulations.
- *Marginalisation by relevance*, where the prevailing socioeconomic model – and the role of higher education within it – is at odds with communities who pursue traditional lifestyles that are culturally important, but distant from the mainstream of wider society. The question is the extent to which individuals in these communities view higher education as relevant to their lives – not whether they will be accepted or supported, but whether it offers something that they have reason to value. For example, is the opportunity for personal discovery through higher education culturally meaningful? Does it provide routes to

advancement within the community or to increase the capability of the community as a whole, for example, by providing new access to legal, medical or business expertise? It can be difficult for mass higher education systems, especially those predicated on a 'numbers game', to think creatively about maintaining relevance to the needs of minority communities.

After drawing on specific examples to illustrate the conceptual model, the paper will conclude by discussing ways in which policymakers, managers and educators can adapt policies and practices to reduce the marginalisation felt by communities and work towards a more socially-just higher education system.

**References:**