

Counting Students or Changing Systems? Reframing Equity Through Marginalisation and Systems Theory

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Abstract

Equity in higher education is commonly framed through administratively defined groups and outcome metrics, obscuring the institutional processes that reproduce exclusion and deficit narratives. This paper aims to reframe equity by foregrounding marginalisation as a context-dependent process and applying systems theory to illuminate how organisational structures and interdependencies generate patterned inequalities. The study synthesises marginalisation scholarship with systems-thinking frameworks to develop a conceptual model to provide theoretical and pragmatic interventions for understanding and addressing exclusion in higher education. Findings show that group-based equity frameworks privilege measurement over mechanism, while a marginalisation lens exposes institutional practices and system dynamics that structure student experiences. A systems-oriented marginalisation framework offers greater explanatory power and clearer leverage points for structural change, shifting responsibility from ‘fixing students’ to redesigning institutional systems to reduce exclusion. Leverage points are identified to enact institutional change.

Keywords: Equity; marginalisation; systems theory; higher education policy; intersectionality; review.

Introduction

Equity in higher education (HE) has long been recognised as a critical dimension of social justice, national productivity, and democratic participation. In systems characterised by massification, diversification, and intensified competition, questions of who enters, succeeds in, and benefits from HE have long been of central importance (Marginson, 2011). Governments and institutions increasingly frame equitable participation as central to both economic and civic agendas, positioning universities as key sites for redressing structural inequalities and enabling fuller participation in contemporary society in Australia and New Zealand (Bradley et al., 2008; Crawford, 2016; Department of Education, 2024; Department of Education Employment and Training [DEET], 1990). Yet, despite sustained policy attention, inequities in HE participation, retention, and outcomes remain persistent and systemically patterned, raising pressing questions about the adequacy of current approaches to advancing fairness and inclusion (Burke et al., 2023; Harvey et al., 2016).

Existing research and policy frameworks overwhelmingly conceptualise equity through group-based categories and outcome metrics. This paper briefly presents two national policy framings, from Australia and New Zealand. While these differ in governance logics—Australia’s more centralised and metrics-driven, New Zealand’s more decentralised and Treaty-oriented—both demonstrate a shared reliance on administratively defined groups, reflecting a wider international tendency to treat equity primarily as a matter of demographic representation (Marginson, 2011).



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However, the lens of group-based equity frameworks leaves several important gaps. First, group-based equity frameworks tend to privilege measurement over mechanism, obscuring the institutional processes that produce unequal outcomes (Gale & Parker, 2013). Second, and perhaps most critically, such approaches often slide into deficit discourses that locate inequity in students rather than in structural conditions, thereby reinforcing dominant norms of merit and preparedness and reducing complex social locations to administratively legible categories (Burke et al., 2023; Harpur et al., 2023; Naylor & Mifsud, 2019; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Although the two national policy frameworks appear based on somewhat different underlying values, and have exhibited somewhat different successes and failings (Asia-Europe Foundation, 2021; Brownie et al., 2025; Department of Education, 2024), achieving equitable, fair, and inclusive access and participation in HE remains elusive in both countries.

While equity has become an established policy priority in HE, the prevailing framing often obscures the underlying problem it seeks to address. Much of the existing discourse treats inequity as a gap in outcomes to be corrected—typically through targets, programs, or support services—rather than interrogating the institutional arrangements that produce those gaps in the first place. This creates a conceptual blind spot: equity policies describe *what* should change, but not *how* systems generate disadvantage or *why* these patterns persist. In this paper, I address this gap by proposing a shift from an equity framing to a marginalisation framing (primarily post-enrolment for students, although the lens may also be applied pre-admission), which enables a more diagnostic focus on the mechanisms through which exclusion is produced. I further extend this reframing through a systems-theoretical approach (Coffman, 2007; Lai & Lin, 2017), offering a conceptual foundation for understanding how organisational structures, practices, and interdependencies shape patterns of participation and success. Drawing on Fluit et al.'s (2024) definition of marginalisation as a context-dependent social process of exclusion, I argue that inequity is best understood as the product of organisational structures, practices, and power relations rather than student deficits.

Accordingly, this study asks: *How can a marginalisation-focused, systems-theory approach provide a more productive framing for understanding and addressing equity issues in HE?* This paper therefore makes conceptual contributions to the literature: such an approach offers clearer diagnostic power, greater alignment with the institutional locus of control, and more meaningful pathways for structural reform than prevailing group-based equity models. Concrete recommendations for action arising from this framing for both institutions and practitioners are proposed, making pragmatic contributions to the field as well.

Policy Context in Australia and New Zealand

The modern era of equity policy in Australian HE is widely recognised as beginning with the Commonwealth Government's 1990 framework *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET, 1990). This set out a national vision that all Australians should have the opportunity to participate successfully in HE and that participation rates should reflect the broader composition of society (DEET, 1990; Harvey et al., 2016). The framework identified six equity groups and established national targets and institutional responsibilities to improve participation and outcomes for these groups. These included people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, First Nations Australians, people from regional and remote areas, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and women in non-traditional fields. This early policy reflected Australian social justice traditions but also emerging neoliberal governance, notably the introduction of measurable targets and performance indicators (Sellar & Gale, 2016; Warren, 2025). This architecture, with only minor modifications, has remained the lens for understanding equity in HE until the present day (Bradley et al., 2008; O'Kane et al., 2024; Tomaszewski et al., 2018). Demand-driven Needs-based Funding and the Disability Support Fund, for example, continue to focus on providing support for the reified student groupings of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, First Nations Australians, people with disabilities, and those studying at regional campuses (Department of Education, 2024), although the chosen terminology may now be 'historically underrepresented groups'.

In contrast to Australia's long-standing identification of discrete equity groups, New Zealand has pursued a distinct policy trajectory grounded in system-wide restructuring, decentralisation, and Treaty-based obligations (Brownie et al., 2025; Crawford, 2016). New Zealand's system places central importance on Indigenous Māori educational success, recognising obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Crawford, 2016). Equity priorities are embedded across multiple strategic documents—such as the National Education and Learning Priorities, Tertiary Education Strategy, and frameworks for Māori and Pacific education—rather than contained in a single equity policy framework (Asia-Europe Foundation, 2021; Brownie et al., 2025). Despite this, New Zealand maintains an (albeit broader) group-based understanding of equity in HE, specifically intending to improve wellbeing and learning outcomes for:

ākonga Māori, Pacific learners/ākonga, learners/ākonga from diverse ethnic communities, disabled learners/ākonga, those with learning support needs, learners/ākonga from the LGBTQIA+ community, and those with diverse needs and experiences. The priorities will also help to encourage girls and women to pursue subjects and careers that are not traditional pathways for them. (Hipkins, 2020, para. 50)

Overall, while both countries pursue widening participation, Australia's approach has been more centralised and metrics-driven. New Zealand's approach appears more decentralised, Treaty-grounded, and shaped by regional disparities and provider-level strategic decisions (Asia-Europe Foundation, 2021), although Brownie et al. (2025) attribute the creation of 'educational deserts' to over-centralisation and inadequate consideration of place. In both countries, HE equity remains a wicked problem and stubbornly difficult to shift.

Reframing the Problem

In both of these national contexts, as in many others (Marginson, 2011), the strategic focus is to advance 'fairness' by changing the composition of the university to better match society along group-based lines. Equity discourse frequently operates at the level of outcomes—for example, metrics such as participation, retention, and completion—thereby privileging *measurement* over *mechanism* (Gale & Parker, 2013; Marginson, 2011). Marginson (2011) distinguishes this from 'inclusion,' whereby the access and completion of under-represented groups is addressed through specific interventions. Developing equity policy through the lens of fairness and inclusion therefore creates a policy logic in which inequity appears as a technical imbalance to be corrected through targets, scholarships, or support programs. Moreover, equity frameworks often slide into deficit characterisations—'equity students,' 'underprepared,' 'at risk'—which locate problems in students' attributes rather than in organisational arrangements (Burke et al., 2023; Gale & Parker, 2013). Such constructions tend to individualise failure and normalise the institution, reifying dominant standards of merit and preparedness that reflect particular social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1986; Naylor & Mifsud, 2019).

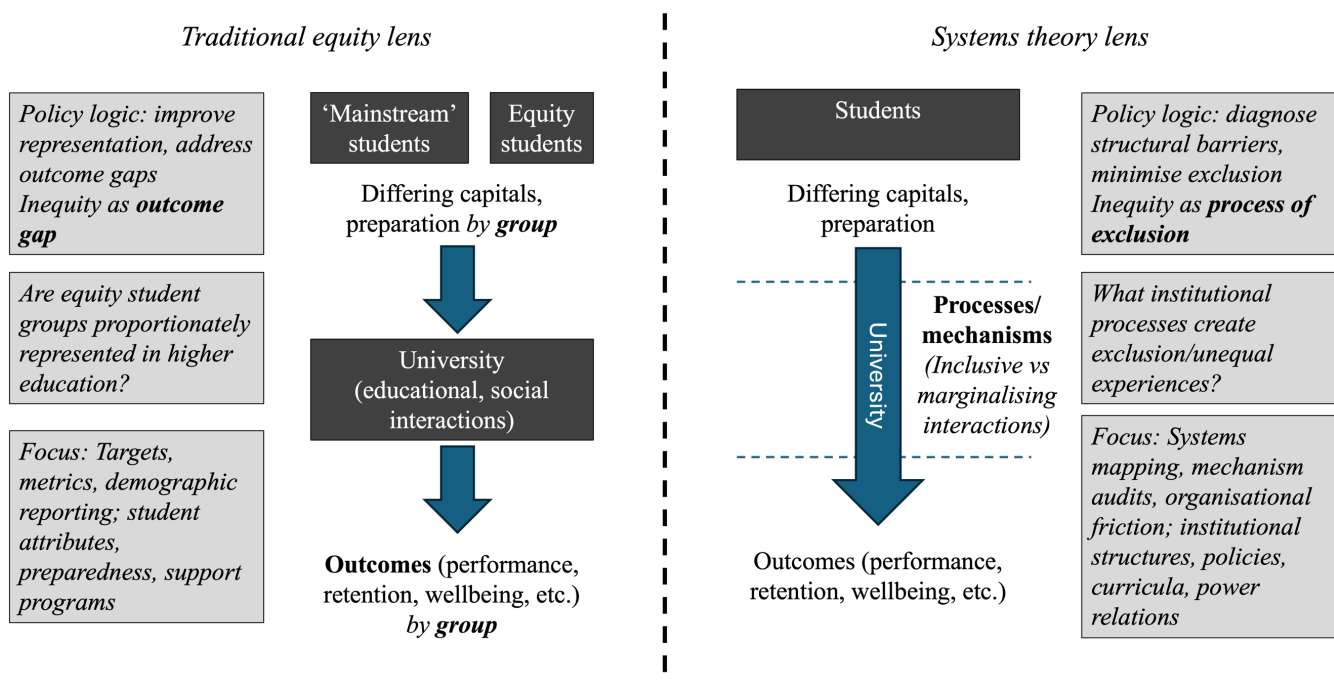
By contrast, a focus on marginalisation reverses this logic: it asks what universities do that marginalise certain students, whose interests are served by current norms, and how power circulates through apparently neutral policies and practices. Here, we adopt the definition of marginalisation established by Fluit et al. (2024) in their cross-discipline scoping review of the concept as having the broadest empirical basis. According to Fluit et al. (2024), marginalisation refers to a context-dependent social process where certain individuals or groups are systematically excluded, and the resulting experience of disadvantage. Both the process and outcomes of marginalisation can vary significantly with context (Fluit et al., 2024), resulting in complex and shifting experiences of marginalisation and relative exclusion.

This change in focus shifts equity to lie within the locus of control of universities. A focus on marginalisation interrogates the production of exclusion: admission and selection regimes, pedagogical and assessment practices, the hidden curriculum, campus climates, financial architectures, and the political economy of HE (Burke et al., 2023). It prioritises institutional diagnostics that map exclusionary mechanisms—admissions algorithms, recognition of prior learning processes, curricular canons, timetable and placement design, digital access requirements, and academic integrity policy impacts—rather than merely tracking demographic targets. Conceptually, this provides clarity and empowers universities to achieve impact by looking internally to remove barriers to student success, rather than trying to address perceived deficits in incoming students.

Attention to marginalisation also supports a robust engagement with intersectionality, a dimension often flattened by equity categories. Group-based policy labels such as 'low socioeconomic status' tend to treat groups as discrete and internally homogenous, simplifying complex social positions into administratively legible units (Harpur et al., 2023; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Intersectional analysis, by contrast, recognises that marginalisation is co-constituted across race, class, gender, disability, migration, and Indigeneity, producing experiences that cannot be captured by merely additive models (Crenshaw, 2013). It also resists 'depoliticisation' or 'diversity without justice,' where representational gains coexist with entrenched hierarchies in curriculum, assessment, and leadership. For example, Harpur et al. (2023) observed in their study of university disability and inclusion action plans that universities demonstrate a desire to respond to intersectionality in HE, but fail to provide meaningful enactment. Similarly, Taskopru et al. (2026) found that university policies created bureaucratic barriers, and privacy laws and ineffective complaint procedures reinforced, rather than mitigated, student exclusion. In both cases, although the representation (symbolically through policy, and in actual student numbers) has increased for students with disabilities, inequities persist. Marginalisation thereby aligns with theories of social justice that treat inequality as a product of both maldistribution and misrecognition, and not simply a gap to be closed (Burke et al., 2023). This redistribution of responsibility is crucial for moving beyond remediation toward structural redesign.

Figure 1

Contrasting a Traditional Equity Lens Approach (Groups, Metrics, Outcomes) With a Marginalisation and Systems Theory Lens Approach (Processes, Mechanisms, Systems)

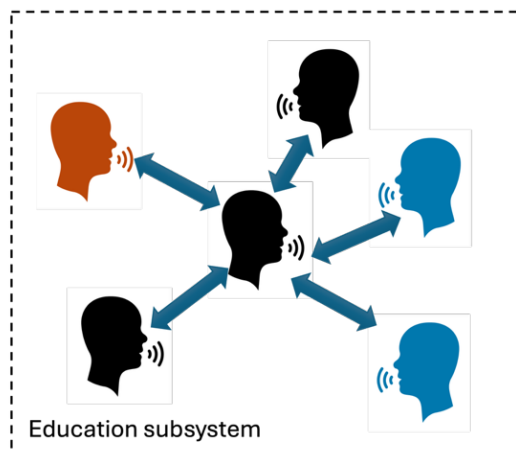
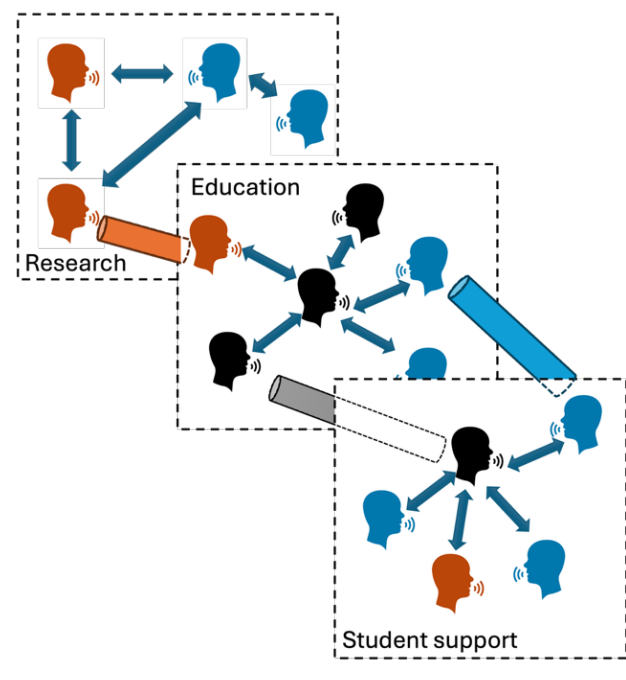


In sum, while equity policy may still name the destination—whether that is population parity, as in Australia, or a more diffuse, social justice-centred response, as in New Zealand—a marginalisation lens seeks to map the obstacles in the way, and the systems that create them. It shifts attention from counting bodies to redesigning institutions; from fixing students to fixing systems.

A System-Theory Understanding of Universities

Understanding marginalisation requires identifying the system-level mechanisms—structural, relational, and cultural—through which exclusion is produced. To put it another way, taking a systems lens exposes the mechanisms through which marginalisation is reproduced more clearly than a conventional ‘equity group’ lens (Figure 1).

HE is increasingly recognised as a dynamic, interconnected, and multi-layered system shaped by a wide array of actors, structures, policies, and historical forces. A system can be understood as a complex, interconnected whole composed of interacting, interrelated, and interdependent components that collectively pursue a particular purpose or goal, whose behaviour cannot be reduced to isolated elements acting in isolation (Coffman, 2007). These components often function within and across multiple subsystems, which can be arranged in different ways. For example, in universities, a particular academic might be engaged with both the ‘education’ and ‘research’ subsystems of the university (potentially among others). Another university might have relatively separate ‘education’ and ‘student support’ subsystems linked only by students and high-level executives (a highly siloed model) or the functions might be organised into one, more fully integrated, system of students, academic staff, professional staff, and leadership. The interactions within or between subsystems can be *tightly* or *loosely coupled*, meaning they are highly interdependent (tight coupling), or that actions in one part of the system have little or unpredictable consequences for other parts of the system (Coffman, 2007; Lai & Lin, 2017). A key aspect of systems change is often identifying tightly coupled relationships to exert influence over the system.

Figure 2*University Subsystems***A.****B.**

Note. Panel A: Schematic of an ‘education’ subsystem of a university, showing interactions between students, academics, and professional staff. Interactions may be inclusive or marginalising; central student has multiple pathways (equipfinal) to achieve educational goals.

Panel B: Multiple subsystems of a university (defined by achieving research, education, or student support goals). Individual agents may interact with different subsystems (shown by connections between levels), or may not (no connections).

Crucially, a system exhibits properties that are more than the sum of its parts (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008), meaning that its collective behaviour cannot be reduced to individual elements acting in isolation. This dynamic is sustained through an overall stable configuration of equilibria, within which components and relationships evolve while maintaining systemic coherence (Geels & Schot, 2007). Although systems may have bottlenecks, they are typically *equipfinal*, meaning that there are different potential pathways for the system to produce outcomes (Lai & Lin, 2017). For example, at a local level, a student might be able to choose between two electives to achieve graduation. At a higher level, an ‘education’ subsystem might achieve learning outcomes for students by funnelling them through different pathways. A ‘high student support’ pathway may include particular attrition, wellbeing, and graduation outcomes, while a ‘low support’ or ‘high marginalisation’ pathway still produces education outcomes but with different efficiencies, and attrition or wellbeing outcomes, for students.

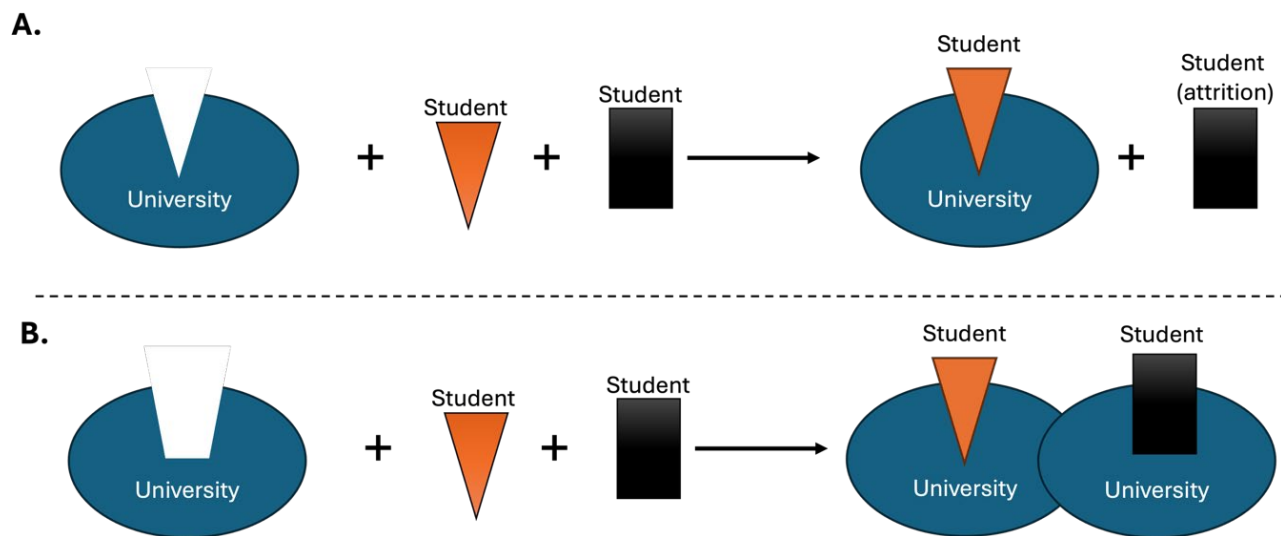
Core systems-thinking principles include attention to feedback loops, interdependencies, system purpose, equipfinality, and emergence—where patterned outcomes persist even when individual components change. Systems thinking is operationalised through tools such as system mapping, causal loop diagrams, and leverage-point analysis, which are designed to surface hidden assumptions, identify tightly and loosely coupled relationships, and locate high-impact points for intervention (Coffman, 2007; Kania et al., 2018). These approaches have been applied across education and public sector contexts to understand complex change processes, policy resistance, and unintended consequences (Ueland et al., 2021; Wallace & York, 2020). For HE equity, systems thinking is particularly valuable because inequities exhibit persistence despite policy attention, often generating compensatory programs that leave underlying structures intact. Rather than treating inequity as a linear problem of insufficient access or support, a systems perspective enables analysis of how institutional norms, resource flows, and mental models interact to reproduce marginalisation over time. It thereby offers stronger diagnostic power and clearer leverage points for structural change (Figure 2).

System stability helps explain why marginalising practices persist even when policy rhetoric promotes inclusion. Although systems can change and adapt (i.e., by coming to preference a ‘high support’ pathway instead of a ‘high marginalisation’ pathway), they are held in relative stability due to internal forces. Collectively termed *organisational friction*, or the organisational and institutional mechanisms by which change is resisted (Rochlin, 2018), these may include resource constraints, policies, cultural norms, psychological contracts and expectations, and habitual ways of doing. Kania et al. (2018) identify three levels at which organisational friction can act, or that change can be effected. These include the explicit and structural level (for example, the policies, practices, and resource flows of the organisation); the semi-explicit, relational level (via power dynamics, relationships, and connections); and the implicit or transformative level (people’s mental models and biases). Kania et al. (2018) posit that each layer is increasingly difficult to change. Change can also come externally, since the overall system remains permeable to environmental influences and external effects (Coffman, 2007; Geels & Schot, 2007); for example, through changes to immigration policy, university funding, or regulation. Geels and Schot (2007) propose a typology of external changes defined by the frequency, amplitude, speed, and scope of the change, including regular, hyperturbulent, shock, disruptive, and avalanche changes. For example, the change in cultural norms and national policy frameworks that underpins the equity frameworks of Australia and New Zealand (see above) appears to have created long, slow change of relatively small impact (a regular change, according to Geels and Schot’s [2007] typology). In contrast, generative artificial intelligence (AI) has provided a disruptive change, while the multiple, high-impact changes arising during the COVID-19 pandemic might be considered an avalanche change, although considerable system resilience was also demonstrated to resist those changes (Lundberg & Stigmar, 2025; Maringe & Chiramba, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2023).

Interconnections are therefore essential to system functionality: strategic linkages between elements enable the system to perform better than it would if these components remained disconnected, reinforcing the value of relational structures in producing optimal outcomes (Coffman, 2007). From this perspective, a system may also be conceptualised as a descriptive set of interconnected categories of influence, highlighting the patterned relationships through which change or stability is produced (Wallace & York, 2020). Importantly, systems encompass not only structural or conceptual components but also groups of people, items, and processes. While their interdependencies are critical to achieving a shared purpose (Lemire et al., 2017), these active agents are also acting to strategically achieve their goals within the bounds of their capabilities and resources (Geels & Schot, 2007). Actors are embedded in rule structures, but they are also active rule users and makers, simultaneously reproducing those structures through their actions (Geels & Schot, 2007; Giddens, 1984). Together, these perspectives emphasise that systems thinking requires close attention to relational dynamics, environmental context, and the ways in which coordinated interaction generates coherent and purposeful outcomes—including the marginalisation of some students.

Discussion and Implications

Universities can be understood as complex systems in which patterns of marginalisation emerge not precisely from the characteristics of particular students but from the structural ‘shapes’ of institutional practices, policies, and subsystems. In traditional equity approaches, universities often act as if students must arrive already shaped (or close to it) to fit a pre-existing institutional ‘lock.’ To borrow a metaphor from biochemistry, this is much like the classical lock-and-key model of enzyme activity (Figure 3), where only substrates with the correct form can participate successfully (Koshland, 1995). In biochemistry, the lock-and-key enzyme model has, however, been superseded by the so-called ‘induced fit’ model, whereby enzymes and substrates reshape each other through their interactions (Koshland, 1995). This is the key insight of Kahu and Nelson’s (2018) education interface, which places student engagement in the mutual interactions between students and institutions—or university staff and communities—to more correctly identify who is interacting with whom at the interface (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Figure 3*'Enzyme' Models of Institutional Fit*

Note. Panel A: Lock and key model. Panel B: Induced fit model.

By contrast to the monolithic equity-groups-and-institutions mental models of the ‘traditional’ ‘lock and key’ equity lens, a marginalisation and systems-thinking lens recognises that institutions are not merely passive structures. They are dynamic, adaptive systems comprised of the interactions of people and the rule structures they create (Giddens, 1984). If organisational friction can be overcome, and equifinal pathways adequately articulated and made available, institutions may be capable of diminishing or removing marginalising experiences. Importantly, although students and staff operate within the system, they are active and have agency, and are therefore empowered to enact change (Naylor et al., 2021). Several studies, within education and beyond, have successfully enacted change or provided theoretical insights through adopting a systems lens (Craike et al., 2023; Naylor, 2025; Pichon, 2019; Ueland et al., 2021; Wallace & York, 2020). A university operating through induced fit actively adjusts its admissions processes, pedagogical design, assessment practices, and relational structures to reduce organisational friction and accommodate diverse forms of student knowledge and experience. This reflects the emphasis provided by this lens on marginalisation as a context-dependent process shaped by system interdependencies, organisational norms, and feedback loops.

If marginalisation is produced through institutional processes rather than student deficits, then universities must be understood as complex systems whose interrelated structures, norms, and actors collectively generate patterned inequalities. A systems perspective therefore provides an essential analytic lens for locating the mechanisms through which marginalisation is reproduced and for identifying leverage points for structural change. Figure 4 identifies a range of actions arising from a marginalisation and systems theory lens that institutions and practitioners can institute to begin to address equity issues, and to disrupt systems to ensure sustained improvements in equitable outcomes. Importantly, these interventions can be made independent of, but support, national (group-based) equity policy outcomes and are positioned at the higher, more accessible levels of Kania et al.’s (2018) hierarchy to ensure they can be pragmatically implemented in existing contexts.

Figure 4*Institutional Actions Arising From Adopting a Marginalisation/Systems Theory Lens to Student Equity**Institutional Policy, Strategy, and Governance*

- Shift policy and internal reporting focus from *equity groups* to *marginalisation mechanisms*—emphasise how admissions, funding structures, and regulatory settings produce exclusion rather than who is excluded.
 - Conduct institutional ‘marginalisation audits’ to map barriers embedded in processes.
 - Reorient performance metrics from demographic representation to diagnostic indicators that capture structural barriers (e.g., admissions algorithms, assessment regimes, timetabling constraints).
- Integrate equity work across subsystems, recognising that tightly and loosely coupled structures influence how effectively universities can respond to exclusion. Particularly, identify tightly coupled interactions for intervention.
- Reduce organisational friction that inhibits system redesign.
- Apply change across explicit, relational, and implicit levels.

Teaching, Learning, and Student Experience

- Embed a systems theory lens to enhance educational delivery, recognising that marginalisation is dynamic.
 - Shift from remediation to structural redesign of curriculum, assessment, and pedagogical practice to minimise built-in barriers (e.g., with Universal Design for Learning).
 - Address the hidden curriculum and cultural norms that privilege particular forms of capital, ensuring learning environments are designed for belonging and accessibility.
- Incorporate process-based indicators in evaluation frameworks (e.g., course reviews) to enable earlier identification of exclusionary practices and map system behaviours and processes.
- Use systems-thinking evaluation tools to capture interactions, feedback loops, and emergent behaviours within the institution.

Scholarship, Practice, and Change Leadership

- Support internal and published research/practice reports that trace the production of marginalisation across institutional systems, not only its demographic outcomes.
- Develop methodologies capable of capturing complexity, intersectionality, and system-level dynamics.
- Bridge critical theory with applied systems thinking to strengthen explanatory and intervention models.
- Promote cross-unit collaboration and shared accountability, recognising that marginalisation emerges from interactions across subsystems rather than isolated failures.
- Foster cultures that support reflexivity, challenge normative assumptions, and enable transformative rather than incremental change.

Conclusion

The language of *equity* has become ubiquitous in HE policy and practice, yet its prevalence can obscure the structural processes that produce exclusion and may be insufficient for addressing the persistent and patterned nature of inequality. Recasting the focus from equity to *marginalisation* foregrounds the mechanisms through which institutions distribute advantage and disadvantage, thereby shifting responsibility from ‘deficient students’ to the systems that shape access, participation, belonging, and success. This reframing is not merely semantic; it redirects analysis to power, history, and institutional practice, enabling more transformative responses than those prompted by outcome-oriented equity metrics alone. Drawing on the examples of Australia and New Zealand, the analysis demonstrates that, despite differing governance logics, both systems remain constrained by group-based imaginaries that privilege measurement over mechanism and risk reinforcing deficit discourses. Crucially, reframing to a lens of marginalisation and systems theory reassigns responsibility from ‘fixing students’ to redesigning university systems. This encourages institutions to reduce organisational friction, articulate inclusive pathways, and adopt an ‘induced fit’ orientation that recognises engagement as produced at the interface between students and institutions. In doing so, the paper contributes a conceptual and pragmatic foundation for moving beyond performative

inclusion toward structural transformation, positioning marginalisation and systems thinking as essential tools for achieving more just, responsive, and sustainable HE systems.

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