

Education Subsidy Policy for Poor Students in Private Universities: A Systematic Literature Review Based on PRISMA

Meng Xuefei^{1,2}, *Noor Insyiraah Binti Abu Bakar³

¹Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia, ²Faculty of General Education, Shandong Huayu University of Technology, Dezhou, China, ³Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Perak, Malaysia

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Abstract

Education subsidy policy plays an important role in promoting educational equity and supporting poor students in higher education. However, compared with public universities, private universities have received relatively limited attention in existing research, despite the fact that poor students in private institutions may face higher tuition fees, greater financial pressure, and fewer institutional support resources. This study conducts a systematic literature review on education subsidy policy for poor students in private universities, focusing on policy implementation, poor student identification, educational equity, and development-oriented financial aid. The review finds that existing research mainly focuses on financial aid systems, poor student identification, implementation effectiveness, and the relationship between financial aid and educational equity. However, there remain several gaps, including insufficient attention to private universities, limited case-based qualitative research, inadequate analysis of students lived experiences, and weak evaluation of long-term policy outcomes. This paper argues that future research should pay more attention to private universities and should examine education subsidy policy from the perspectives of implementation process, student experience, dignity protection, and development-oriented support.

Keywords: Education Subsidy Policy, Poor Students, Private Universities, Policy Implementation, Educational Equity

Introduction

Higher education is widely regarded as an important pathway for individual development, social mobility, and human capital formation. With the expansion of higher education, more students from economically disadvantaged families have gained access to universities (Bao, 2020). However, entering university does not necessarily mean that these students enjoy equal educational opportunities. Poor students may still face financial pressures related to tuition fees, accommodation, living expenses, learning materials, transportation, and campus participation (Aziz, Taha, Sandramogan, Kasim, & Harun, 2025). These pressures may affect

their academic engagement, psychological well-being, sense of belonging, and ability to complete their studies.

The specific problem addressed in this study is that education subsidy policies for poor students, although widely implemented, may not always achieve their intended goals effectively, especially in private universities (Liu, 2023). Problems such as inaccurate identification of poor students, insufficient subsidy amounts, complicated application procedures, privacy concerns, uneven policy implementation, and limited developmental support may weaken the fairness and effectiveness of these policies.

This issue is particularly important in private universities. Compared with public universities, private universities often charge higher tuition fees and rely more heavily on tuition income. Therefore, poor students in private universities may experience heavier financial burdens (Zancajo, Verger, & Fontdevila, 2022). Private universities may have relatively limited institutional funding and weaker student support mechanisms. This makes subsidy policy implementation in private universities a significant issue related to educational equity, student development, and institutional responsibility.

Although existing studies have examined student financial aid in higher education, many focus on public universities or general financial aid systems. Relatively fewer studies have explored how subsidy policies are implemented in private universities and how poor students experience these policies (Stuardo & Cayuela, 2019). Therefore, this study conducts a systematic literature review on education subsidy policy for poor students in private universities, focusing on policy implementation, poor student identification, educational equity, and development-oriented financial aid. The review aims to clarify existing research findings, identify major challenges, and provide directions for future empirical studies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a systematic literature review method to examine existing research on education subsidy policy for poor students in private universities. The review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 framework, which provides a transparent and structured procedure for identifying, screening, evaluating, and including relevant literature (Rethlefsen & Page, 2022).

A systematic literature review was considered appropriate for this study because the topic involves several interconnected themes, including student financial aid, poor students, private higher education, policy implementation, and educational equity (Mishra & Mishra, 2023). By using a systematic review approach, this study aims to synthesize previous findings, identify major research trends, and clarify existing gaps in the literature.

The review focused mainly on studies published from 2021 onwards in order to capture recent academic discussions (Ramasamy, 2022). However, several earlier theoretical or policy-related studies were also considered when they provided important conceptual foundations for understanding educational equity, human capital, policy implementation, or student financial aid.

Databases and Search Strategy

To ensure comprehensive coverage of both international and Chinese scholarship, literature searches were conducted in several English and Chinese academic databases (Page et al., 2022). The English databases included Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The Chinese databases included CNKI.

The search strategy combined keywords related to five core concepts: education subsidy policy, poor students, private universities, policy implementation, and educational equity (Rethlefsen & Page, 2022). Boolean operators such as “AND” and “OR” were used to broaden or narrow the search results. The search terms included “education subsidy policy,” “student financial aid,” “poor students,” “economically disadvantaged students,” “private university,” “policy implementation,” and “educational equity.” Chinese search terms included “教育资助政策,” “贫困生,” “家庭经济困难学生,” “民办高校,” “政策实施,” “教育公平,” “精准资助,” and “发展型资助.” The search process was conducted by screening titles, abstracts, keywords, and full texts where available (Mishra & Mishra, 2023). Reference lists of highly relevant studies were also checked manually to identify additional sources.

PRISMA Literature Screening Process

The literature screening process followed the four stages of PRISMA: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

In the identification stage, 326 records were retrieved from the selected databases. An additional 12 records were identified through manual searching, including reference list tracing and relevant policy documents (Mishra & Mishra, 2023). Therefore, 338 records were initially identified.

After removing 64 duplicate records, 274 records remained for title and abstract screening. During the screening stage, 163 records were excluded because they were not sufficiently related to higher education, poor students, education subsidy policy, private universities, or educational equity (Rethlefsen & Page, 2022).

The remaining 111 records were then assessed through full-text review. During the eligibility assessment stage, 76 studies were excluded for reasons such as irrelevant study population, lack of focus on poor students, weak connection with subsidy policy implementation, insufficient theoretical or empirical depth, weak relevance to private universities, or unavailable full text (Page et al., 2022). Finally, 35 studies were included in the systematic literature review.

The PRISMA screening process is summarized below:

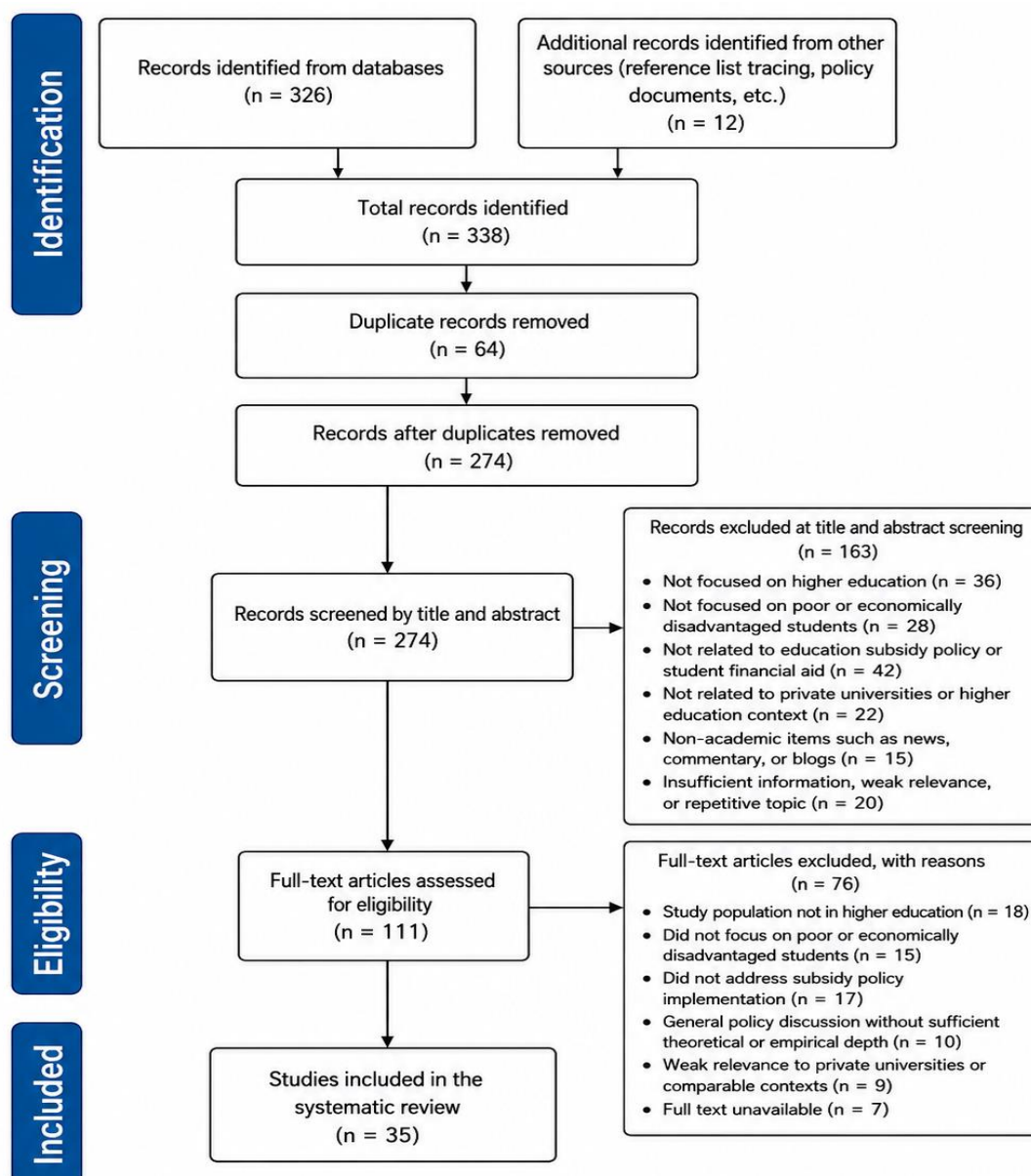


Figure1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

Data Extraction

After the final inclusion of 35 studies, key information was extracted from each selected document. The extracted information included author, year of publication, research context, research object, methodology, key findings, theoretical perspective, and relevance to the present study (Rethlefsen & Page, 2022).

The purpose of data extraction was to identify common themes and patterns across the literature (Mishra & Mishra, 2023). Particular attention was paid to how previous studies discussed the following issues: Types and structures of education subsidy policies; Identification mechanisms for poor students; Implementation procedures of student financial aid; Challenges faced by private universities; The relationship between financial aid and educational equity; The shift from financial assistance to development-oriented aid (Ramasamy, 2022).

Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis. After repeated reading of the included studies, recurring themes were identified, coded, and categorized (Page et al., 2022). The analysis focused on similarities, differences, and gaps across the literature.

Five major themes emerged from the analysis: Education subsidy policy and educational equity; Identification of poor students; Policy implementation mechanisms; Financial aid in private universities; Development-oriented financial aid.

These themes were used to organize the results section of the review (Ramasamy, 2022). Through thematic synthesis, this study aimed to provide a structured understanding of how education subsidy policy for poor students has been studied and what issues remain unresolved.

Results

The 35 studies included in this systematic literature review were analyzed through thematic analysis. After repeated reading, coding, and comparison, five major themes were identified: education subsidy policy and educational equity, identification of poor students, policy implementation mechanisms, financial aid in private universities, and development-oriented financial aid (Zhang, 2024). These themes reflect the major concerns and research directions in the existing literature.

Education Subsidy Policy and Educational Equity

The reviewed literature shows that education subsidy policy is widely regarded as an important instrument for promoting educational equity in higher education (Long, 2022). Most studies emphasize that financial difficulties remain one of the main barriers preventing poor students from accessing and completing university education. Although the expansion of higher education has increased enrollment opportunities, students from low-income families still face unequal conditions after entering university (Wang et al., 2019).

Existing studies suggest that education subsidy policies help promote educational equity in three major dimensions (Zhang, 2018). They improve access equity by reducing the financial burden of tuition fees and admission-related costs. For students from poor families, financial aid can make university enrollment more realistic and affordable (Zhao, 2018). Subsidy policies contribute to process equity by supporting students' living expenses, accommodation, learning materials, transportation, and daily study needs. This enables poor students to participate more fully in campus life and academic activities (Zhang, 2018). Financial aid may promote outcome equity by reducing dropout risks, improving academic persistence, and supporting students' graduation and employment preparation.

The literature also indicates that student financial aid systems usually include multiple forms of support, such as grants, scholarships, student loans, tuition reduction, temporary hardship assistance, work-study programs, and university-level subsidies (He, 2016). These policy tools together form a multi-layered support system for poor students. However, the effectiveness of this system depends not only on the existence of aid programs but also on whether the aid is sufficient, fairly distributed, and effectively implemented (Feng, 2021).

A key finding is that educational equity cannot be achieved merely by providing financial support. Some studies argue that if financial aid is distributed through unclear procedures or if the amount of aid is too limited to meet students' actual needs, the policy may have only a symbolic effect (Sun, 2022). Therefore, the relationship between education subsidy policy and educational equity should be examined from both policy design and implementation outcomes.

For private universities, this issue is particularly important. Since tuition fees in private institutions are often higher than those in public universities, poor students in private universities may experience more serious financial pressure (Feng, 2021). Therefore, the same amount of financial aid may have different effects in public and private universities (Zhong, 2020). This suggests that educational equity in private higher education requires more targeted and institution-sensitive subsidy policies.

Identification of Poor Students

The identification of poor students is one of the most frequently discussed issues in the reviewed literature. Accurate identification is considered the foundation of fair and effective financial aid distribution (Zheng & Cui, 2019). If poor students are not accurately identified, financial aid resources may fail to reach those who need them most.

Most studies indicate that universities commonly use a combination of student application, family economic condition forms, official poverty certificates, counselor review, class-level evaluation, public announcement, and institutional approval to identify poor students (Zhao, 2018). This multi-step procedure is designed to improve fairness and reduce false applications (Sun, 2022). However, the reviewed literature also reveals that the identification process remains complex and controversial.

Family income information is often difficult to verify. Some students' family income may come from informal work, farming, temporary employment, small businesses, or unstable sources. These income patterns are difficult to measure through standard documents (Zhong, 2020). As a result, formal certificates may not fully reflect students' real economic conditions.

Regional differences may affect the fairness of identification. The same family income level may represent different living standards in different regions (Zheng & Cui, 2019). Students from rural areas, remote regions, or economically underdeveloped areas may face additional financial burdens that are not fully captured by standard assessment forms.

The process of class-level evaluation or public announcement may create privacy and dignity concerns. Some studies point out that poor students may feel embarrassed when their family economic situation is discussed publicly (Zhao, 2018). This may discourage some students from applying for aid, even when they genuinely need support. Therefore, the identification process may unintentionally create stigma or psychological pressure.

The literature identifies two common types of identification errors: exclusion errors and inclusion errors (Wang, 2021). Exclusion errors occur when genuinely poor students fail to receive aid. Inclusion errors occur when students who are not truly economically

disadvantaged receive financial aid. Both errors weaken the fairness and credibility of the subsidy system (Guan, 2024).

The reviewed studies increasingly suggest that poor student identification should move toward a more dynamic, precise, and privacy-protective model (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023). Rather than relying only on one-time application documents, universities should consider continuous monitoring, counselor observation, student interviews, family situation updates, and digital information systems (Xu, 2025). However, the use of digital or data-based methods should also be balanced with privacy protection and ethical considerations.

Policy Implementation Mechanisms

The reviewed literature shows that policy implementation is a decisive factor influencing the effectiveness of education subsidy policies. Even when policy design is comprehensive, poor implementation may reduce its actual impact (Zhang, Sun, & Xue, 2021). Therefore, many studies emphasize the gap between policy formulation and policy practice.

Education subsidy policy implementation usually involves several stages: policy communication, student application, qualification review, democratic evaluation, public announcement, fund allocation, follow-up supervision, and policy feedback (Chen, 2023). Each stage affects the fairness and effectiveness of the final outcome.

The literature highlights several important actors in the implementation process. Government departments usually provide macro-level policy guidance and financial support (Cao, 2021). University leaders are responsible for institutional arrangements and resource allocation. Student affairs offices coordinate the overall implementation process (Wang, 2020). Counselors serve as front-line implementers who directly interact with students. Students themselves are both policy beneficiaries and participants in the application and evaluation process.

Among these actors, counselors and student affairs administrators receive particular attention in the literature. They are responsible for explaining policies, collecting application materials, verifying information, organizing evaluations, identifying students in need, and providing follow-up support (Bao, 2020). However, many studies report that counselors often face heavy workloads and limited professional training (Wang, 2021). In some universities, one counselor may be responsible for a large number of students, making it difficult to conduct detailed and individualized assessment.

Another important issue is transparency. Transparent procedures can increase students' trust in the financial aid system (He, 2016). However, excessive transparency may conflict with privacy protection. For example, public announcement of aid recipients may help prevent unfair distribution, but it may also expose students' private family information (Dong & Liu, 2020). Therefore, universities need to balance openness, fairness, and confidentiality.

The literature also shows that policy implementation effectiveness depends on institutional capacity (Qian, Yang, & Luo, 2016). Universities with better information systems, professional financial aid teams, clear procedures, and regular evaluation mechanisms are more likely to implement subsidy policies effectively (Sun & Wang, 2019). In contrast, institutions with

limited staff, weak data management, or unclear responsibilities may experience inconsistent implementation.

For private universities, policy implementation may face additional challenges. These institutions may have fewer financial aid staff, limited internal funding, and less developed administrative systems (Huang, 2019). As a result, policy implementation in private universities may depend heavily on the commitment and capacity of counselors and student affairs offices.

Financial Aid in Private Universities

A major finding of this review is that private universities remain underrepresented in existing research on student financial aid (Cao, 2021). Many studies focus on public universities or general higher education systems, while fewer studies specifically examine private universities. This is a significant gap because private universities have distinctive institutional characteristics and student financial aid challenges.

The reviewed literature suggests that poor students in private universities may face greater financial pressure for several reasons. First, tuition fees in private universities are usually higher than those in public universities (Wang, 2020). Second, private universities may provide fewer institution-funded scholarships or subsidies due to limited financial resources (Dong & Liu, 2020). Third, some private universities depend heavily on tuition income, which may restrict their ability to reduce tuition or expand aid programs (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023). Fourth, students in private universities may have diverse family backgrounds and different levels of financial need.

Existing studies indicate that the financial aid system in private universities often relies on national or government-supported subsidy programs (Song, 2019). While these programs are important, they may not be sufficient to meet the specific needs of poor students in private institutions (Guan, 2024). For example, a national grant may reduce part of the living cost, but it may not be enough to offset high tuition fees. Therefore, poor students in private universities may still face considerable financial stress even after receiving aid.

The literature also points out that private universities may face limitations in financial aid management. Some institutions may lack specialized financial aid offices or professional staff (Bao, 2020). Some may not have strong mechanisms for tracking student needs after aid is distributed. Others may lack diversified funding sources such as alumni donations, enterprise scholarships, social assistance funds, or emergency support programs (Sun & Wang, 2019).

However, the literature also suggests that private universities have potential flexibility (Zhou, 2019). Compared with large public institutions, private universities may be able to develop more flexible school-level aid programs, cooperate with enterprises, create work-study positions, and design targeted support for applied and vocational development (Sun, 2019). Therefore, financial aid in private universities should not simply copy the model of public universities (Zhang, Sun, & Xue, 2021). It should consider institutional characteristics, tuition structure, student needs, and local social resources.

This finding is directly relevant to the case of Shandong Huayu University of Technology. As a private university, it may face similar issues regarding tuition pressure, resource limitations, poor student identification, and policy implementation (Xu, 2025). Therefore, studying this university can provide useful empirical evidence for understanding how subsidy policy operates in private higher education.

Development-Oriented Financial Aid

Another important theme emerging from the literature is the shift from traditional financial assistance to development-oriented financial aid (Huang, 2019). Traditional financial aid mainly focuses on solving students' immediate economic difficulties. However, the reviewed studies increasingly argue that poor students need not only financial support but also academic, psychological, social, and career development support (Qian, Yang, & Luo, 2016). Development-oriented financial aid emphasizes the integration of economic support and student development (Zhu, 2016). It suggests that universities should help poor students improve their learning ability, psychological resilience, social participation, employability, and long-term development capacity (Sun, 2019). This approach reflects a broader understanding of poverty. Poverty is not only a lack of money but may also involve limited access to educational resources, social networks, confidence, information, and career opportunities (Wang, 2016).

The literature identifies several forms of development-oriented support. These include academic tutoring, psychological counseling, career guidance, employment training, entrepreneurship education, mentoring programs, leadership development, social practice, and professional skills training (Song, 2019). When combined with financial aid, these forms of support may help poor students overcome both economic and non-economic disadvantages.

Several studies argue that development-oriented aid is especially important for higher education institutions because university education is closely connected with employment and social mobility (Zhu, 2016). If financial aid only helps students survive economically but does not improve their academic and career development, its long-term effect may be limited. Therefore, subsidy policy should be linked with broader student development services (Qiao, 2021).

For private universities, development-oriented aid is particularly meaningful. Many private universities emphasize applied talent training, practical skills, and employment-oriented education (Feng, 2022). Therefore, financial aid can be connected with internship opportunities, enterprise cooperation, vocational skills training, innovation and entrepreneurship programs, and career counseling (Wang, 2016). In this way, poor students can receive not only financial relief but also practical support for future employment.

However, the reviewed literature also shows that development-oriented aid remains more of a policy ideal than a fully developed practice in many institutions (Qiao, 2021). Some universities still focus mainly on fund distribution and lack systematic follow-up support. There is also limited empirical evidence on how development-oriented financial aid affects students' academic achievement, psychological well-being, employability, and social mobility (Feng, 2022). This remains an important direction for future research.

In summary, the results of the thematic analysis indicate that education subsidy policy is closely associated with educational equity, but its effectiveness depends heavily on accurate student identification, transparent procedures, institutional capacity, and developmental support (Dong & Liu, 2020). The literature also reveals that private universities remain insufficiently studied, despite the fact that poor students in these institutions may face greater financial pressure (Xu, 2025). These findings provide a basis for further discussion of the challenges, research gaps, and implications of education subsidy policy in private universities.

Discussion

Main Findings

This review shows that education subsidy policy has been widely recognized as an important mechanism for promoting educational equity (Guan, 2024). It helps reduce the financial burden of poor students and supports their participation in higher education (Zhou, 2019). However, the effectiveness of subsidy policy depends not only on the amount of financial support but also on the quality of policy implementation.

The literature indicates that the most important implementation issues include accurate identification of poor students, transparent allocation of funds, protection of student privacy, professional capacity of administrators, and evaluation of policy outcomes (Zhang, 2024). In particular, poor student identification remains a key challenge. If identification is inaccurate, financial aid may fail to reach the students most in need.

Another important finding is that private universities are underrepresented in existing research (Long, 2022). Many studies focus on public universities or general higher education systems, while private institutions are often treated as a marginal topic. This is problematic because private universities have distinctive funding structures, student populations, tuition levels, and administrative conditions (He, 2016). Therefore, the implementation of subsidy policy in private universities may differ significantly from that in public universities.

Theoretical Implications

Educational equity theory provides a useful framework for analyzing education subsidy policy (Sun, 2022). Financial aid should be understood not only as economic assistance but also as a mechanism for promoting access equity, process equity, and outcome equity.

Human capital theory helps explain the long-term value of education subsidy policy (Zhong, 2020). Supporting poor students in completing higher education can improve their knowledge, skills, employability, and social mobility.

Policy implementation theory highlights the gap between policy design and policy practice (Feng, 2021). A well-designed policy may fail to achieve its goals if implementation procedures are unclear, resources are insufficient, or administrators lack professional capacity.

Practical Implications

Private universities should improve the accuracy of poor student identification. This may require a combination of student self-reporting, family economic information verification, big data support, counselor observation, and dynamic adjustment mechanisms (Qiao, 2021).

Universities should strengthen privacy protection. The process of identifying and supporting poor students should avoid unnecessary public exposure and reduce the risk of stigmatization (Zheng & Cui, 2019).

Private universities should diversify financial aid resources (Cao, 2021). In addition to government subsidies, they may develop institutional grants, alumni donations, enterprise scholarships, work-study opportunities, and emergency assistance funds (Xu, 2019). Financial aid should be connected with student development. Poor students may need not only money but also academic guidance, mental health support, career counseling, employability training, and social participation opportunities (Chen, 2023).

Universities should establish evaluation mechanisms. The effectiveness of subsidy policy should be assessed not only by the number of students funded but also by students' academic progress, satisfaction, graduation rates, employment outcomes, and personal development (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023).

Limitations of Existing Literature

Although existing studies have provided valuable insights, several limitations remain. First, research on education subsidy policy in private universities is still limited (Zhang, Sun, & Xue, 2021). Many studies discuss student financial aid in higher education generally, but they do not sufficiently distinguish between public and private institutions.

Existing research tends to focus on policy design and administrative procedures, while less attention is paid to students' lived experiences. Poor students' perceptions of fairness, dignity, privacy, and policy effectiveness are not sufficiently explored (Bao, 2020). The perspectives of frontline policy implementers are underrepresented. Counselors and student affairs officers play a central role in policy implementation, yet their workload, professional challenges, and decision-making processes are not fully examined (Sun & Wang, 2019).

Many studies focus on short-term financial relief, while long-term outcomes remain insufficiently studied (Dong & Liu, 2020). There is still limited evidence on whether education subsidy policies improve academic achievement, psychological development, employment outcomes, and social mobility. Methodological diversity remains limited (Huang, 2019). Many studies rely on policy analysis or questionnaire surveys, while qualitative interviews, case studies, longitudinal research, and mixed-methods designs are still insufficient.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined existing research on education subsidy policy for poor students in private universities (Zhang, Sun, & Xue, 2021). Following the PRISMA framework, the review identified and analyzed studies related to student financial aid, poor student identification, policy implementation, educational equity, and development-oriented financial aid (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023). The findings show that education subsidy policy is an important tool for promoting educational equity and supporting poor students in higher education. However, the implementation of such policies remains challenging (Chen, 2023). Problems include inaccurate identification of poor students, insufficient funding, privacy risks, weak policy evaluation, and limited developmental support.

The review also finds that private universities have not received sufficient attention in existing research (Cao, 2021). This is a significant gap because poor students in private universities may face greater financial pressure due to higher tuition fees and limited institutional resources (Bao, 2020). Therefore, future research should pay more attention to private universities and conduct in-depth case studies on how subsidy policies are implemented in specific institutional contexts.

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