

Challenges in Implementing Education Subsidy Policy for Poor Students in Private Universities: A Qualitative Case Study of Shandong Huayu University of Technology

Meng Xuefei, Noor Insyiraah Binti Abu Bakar*

Sultan Idris Education University

Corresponding Author Email: insyirah@fpm.upsi.edu.my

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Abstract

Education subsidy policy plays an important role in promoting educational equity by supporting students from economically disadvantaged families to access and complete higher education. Although China has established a relatively comprehensive student financial aid system, the effective implementation of subsidy policies remains challenging, particularly in private universities where institutional conditions and student backgrounds create complex implementation contexts. This study explores the challenges encountered in implementing education subsidy policy for poor students in a private university in China. A qualitative case study design was adopted, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis at Shandong Huayu University of Technology. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns related to policy implementation challenges. The findings reveal five major challenges: identification and recognition limitations, stigma, privacy, and psychological pressure, coverage and aid-intensity constraints, evaluation fairness concerns, and insufficient developmental and educational support. The study demonstrates that the implementation of education subsidy policy involves not only financial distribution but also complex processes of identification, communication, evaluation, and student support. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of financial aid implementation in private higher education contexts and provide implications for improving student-centred subsidy practices.

Keywords: Education Subsidy Policy, Policy Implementation, Private University, Poor Students, Qualitative Case Study

Introduction

Higher education is widely recognized as a powerful engine for social mobility, personal development, and long-term economic well-being (Cao, 2021). For students from economically disadvantaged families, access to university represents not only a pathway to academic advancement but also a crucial opportunity to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and improve their future life prospects (Feng, 2022). In recent years, the Chinese government has placed increasing emphasis on educational equity as a cornerstone of social justice and national development, framing it as an essential component of its broader strategy

to achieve "common prosperity." Ensuring that no student is excluded from higher education due to financial hardship has become a paramount policy objective within this national agenda.

To translate this objective into practice, China has developed one of the world's most comprehensive student financial aid systems, encompassing national scholarships, need-based grants, student loans, tuition reductions, work-study programmes, and temporary hardship assistance (Liu, 2023). These policies are designed to lower economic barriers and ensure that students from impoverished backgrounds can access, persist in, and complete tertiary education (Qiao, 2021). However, the effectiveness of education subsidy policy depends not only on policy design but critically on implementation—on how policies are interpreted, operationalized, and experienced at the institutional level. It is in this "implementation gap" between policy goals and real-world practice that many significant challenges emerge.

Within the diverse landscape of Chinese higher education, private universities represent a uniquely consequential yet underexplored context for examining this implementation gap. Unlike their public counterparts, which benefit from substantial government funding and stable resources, private universities often operate under significant financial constraints and possess more limited administrative capacities (Xu, 2025). They frequently enroll a diverse student body with varying socioeconomic backgrounds, including a substantial proportion of students from rural and low-income families who are the primary targets of subsidy policies. This combination of constrained resources and high-need populations creates a particularly complex environment for policy implementation, where challenges related to resource allocation, student identification, procedural fairness, and developmental support are often amplified (Zhang, Sun, & Xue, 2021).

Previous research has extensively documented the structural design of China's student financial aid system and its macro-level impact on reducing educational inequality (Feng, 2022). However, significantly less attention has been devoted to the practical, day-to-day challenges encountered during implementation, especially from the dual perspectives of policy implementers and student beneficiaries within private university settings (Deng, Chen, & Zhong, 2023). In practice, institutional actors must grapple with difficult questions: How can universities accurately identify students with genuine, often hidden, financial difficulties? How can they balance procedural transparency with personal privacy? How can limited resources be allocated fairly? And how can universities move beyond financial disbursement to provide developmental support that disadvantaged students need to thrive?

To systematically analyze these dynamics, this study draws upon Smith's Policy Implementation Theory (Li, 2021). This framework posits that policy outcomes are shaped by dynamic interactions among four elements: the idealized policy (goals and objectives), the implementing organization (university structures and staff), the target group (students), and the environmental factors (institutional and social context). By applying this lens, the study offers a theoretically informed analysis of why implementation challenges arise and how they interact to shape outcomes in a private university context (Chen, 2023; Huang, 2019). Taking Shandong Huayu University of Technology as a qualitative case study, this research aims to

explore the difficulties experienced by both policy implementers and student beneficiaries during the subsidy implementation process.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What challenges are encountered in implementing education subsidy policy for poor students in a private university?

RQ2: How do these challenges influence students' experiences and perceptions of the subsidy policy implementation process?

Literature Review

Policy Implementation Gaps and Institutional Constraints

The implementation of education subsidy policy is not a simple process of transferring financial resources from the government or university to students. It involves policy interpretation, administrative coordination, student communication, eligibility assessment, fund distribution, supervision, and follow-up support (Sun & Wang, 2019; Wu & Lei, 2023). In higher education institutions, policy implementation often depends on how national policy goals are translated into university-level procedures.

Previous studies have shown that one major challenge in policy implementation is the gap between policy design and institutional practice (Zheng & Cui, 2019). Policy documents may clearly state the goal of supporting poor students, but universities must decide how to identify eligible students, how to evaluate applications, how to balance transparency with privacy, and how to respond to student complaints (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023). These practical tasks require administrative capacity and professional judgement.

In the context of private universities, implementation challenges may become more visible. Private universities often operate under stronger financial constraints and may have fewer administrative resources than well-funded public universities (Guan, 2024). Counsellors and student affairs staff usually play a central role in policy publicity, material collection, review organization, and student communication. Their workload, professional understanding, and communication style may directly affect students' experience of the subsidy policy.

Information Dissemination Barriers and Students' Policy Understanding

Another implementation challenge lies in policy communication. Students may not fully understand the differences among grants, scholarships, loans, and temporary assistance (Xu, 2025; Sun, 2022). Some students may miss application deadlines or prepare incomplete materials because policy information is not delivered clearly.

For new students, especially those from rural or low-income families, the application process may appear complicated (Stuardo & Cayuela, 2019; Feng, 2021). Therefore, effective implementation requires not only formal procedures but also accessible communication and continuous guidance. Without effective information dissemination, students may encounter difficulties in accessing available financial support, which may weaken the effectiveness of the subsidy policy.

Difficulties in Identifying and Assessing Financially Disadvantaged Students

Accurate identification of poor students is one of the most difficult aspects of subsidy policy implementation (Zhang, 2018; Song, 2019). The fairness of financial aid depends largely on whether universities can identify students with genuine economic difficulties. However, family poverty is often complex, dynamic, and difficult to measure through simple documents.

Many students' family income comes from informal employment, farming, small businesses, or temporary work. In such cases, income certificates may not fully reflect the actual economic situation (Aziz, Taha, Sandramogan, Kasim, & Harun, 2025). Some families may appear stable in formal documents but face serious medical expenses, debt, or unexpected crises. Other families may experience sudden income loss after the annual identification process has already been completed. These realities make poverty identification an ongoing challenge.

Universities often use a combination of application forms, family income materials, certificates, counsellor observation, class review, and student interviews (Bao, 2020). This mixed approach can improve accuracy, but it also creates concerns about subjectivity. If students do not understand the criteria, they may question why some classmates receive higher levels of aid (Feng, 2022). Perceived unfairness may arise even when procedures are formally followed.

Fairness Concerns and Psychological Pressure in the Evaluation Process

Fairness is both a procedural issue and an experiential issue. Procedural fairness requires clear criteria, standardized review, public supervision, and appeal channels (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023; Wang, Zhang, Sun, Zhang, & Chen, 2019). Experiential fairness depends on whether students believe the process is reasonable, respectful, and trustworthy. If students perceive the process as unclear or biased, their trust in the policy may decline.

The public notice system also creates tension between fairness and privacy. Publicity can prevent fraud and increase transparency, but it may expose students' poverty status and create psychological pressure (Zhao, 2018; Long, 2022; Dong & Liu, 2020). Some students may feel embarrassed or labelled. Others may avoid applying because they do not want classmates to know their family situation. Therefore, a fair subsidy system must protect both procedural transparency and personal dignity.

Research Gap

Previous research has extensively documented the structural design of China's student financial aid system, tracking its historical evolution, policy categories, and funding mechanisms (Liu, 2023; Wu & Lei, 2023). A substantial body of literature has also examined the macro-level effectiveness of these policies in reducing educational inequality and improving enrollment rates among disadvantaged groups (Feng, 2022; Deng, Chen, & Zhong, 2023). However, these studies predominantly adopt a policy-design or outcome-evaluation perspective, leaving the process of implementation largely unexamined.

More recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge that implementation challenges—such as identification inaccuracies, fairness disputes, and student psychological distress—are critical

mediators between policy intent and actual outcomes (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023; Guan, 2024). Nevertheless, the existing literature remains disproportionately focused on public universities, which benefit from stable government funding and well-established administrative systems. Private universities, by contrast, have received minimal empirical attention despite operating under markedly different institutional conditions—including tighter financial constraints, leaner administrative staffing, and more diverse student populations (Sun, 2022; Zhang, 2024). This institutional distinctiveness suggests that implementation challenges in private universities may be not only more acute but also qualitatively different from those in public institutions.

Moreover, prior studies have rarely captured the interactional dynamics between policy implementers (counsellors and student affairs staff) and student beneficiaries during the implementation process. Most research relies on either administrative data or surveys, which, while useful for identifying patterns, cannot adequately reveal the lived experiences, discretionary judgments, and communication barriers that shape how subsidy policies are actually practiced (Chen, 2023; Bao, 2020). Consequently, there exists a notable gap in understanding how implementation challenges emerge, interact, and impact students' experiences within the specific context of private higher education.

Given these gaps, this study offers a timely and necessary contribution by conducting an in-depth qualitative case study at Shandong Huayu University of Technology. By examining the perspectives of both counsellors and students, the research aims to uncover the nuanced, context-specific challenges of education subsidy policy implementation, thereby providing empirical grounding for more equitable and student-centred policy practices in private universities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design. The case study approach is suitable because the research focuses on a specific policy phenomenon within a real institutional context (Bazen, Barg, & Takeshita, 2021). Education subsidy policy is not only a written policy but also a set of practices experienced by counsellors and students. A qualitative design allows the study to explore meanings, perceptions, and implementation processes in depth.

Research Site and Participants

The research site is Shandong Huayu University of Technology, a private university in Shandong Province, China. The university was selected because it represents the private higher education context in which national subsidy policies are implemented under specific institutional conditions (Levitt, Morrill, Collins, & Rizo, 2021).

Participants included counsellors and students. Counsellors were selected because they are directly involved in policy publicity, application guidance, material review, poverty identification, and student communication (Liu, 2023). Student participants included those who had successfully received subsidies and those who had applied but were unsuccessful. This helped the study capture different experiences of access, fairness, and policy effects.

Table 3.1

Profile of Teacher Participants

Participant	Position	Gender	Years of Work Experience
T1	Counsellor	Male	11 years
T2	Counsellor	Male	5 years
T3	Counsellor	Female	8 years
T4	Counsellor	Female	10 years

Table 3.2

Profile of Student Participants

Category	Sub-category	Number of Participants
Gender	Male	13
	Female	11
Major	Engineering-related majors	10
	Management-related majors	10
	Other majors	4
Year of Study	Year 1	6
	Year 2	7
	Year 3	6
	Year 4	5
Total		24

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. Interviews with counsellors focused on implementation procedures, review standards, identification difficulties, student communication, and improvement suggestions (Mishra & Dey, 2022). Interviews with students explored their understanding of the policy, application experience, economic pressure, psychological feelings, learning changes, and perceptions of fairness.

Observation was used to understand policy publicity, student consultation, application guidance, and review arrangements (Robinson, 2023). Document analysis included policy notices, application guidelines, review procedures, subsidy categories, and related institutional materials.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Interview materials were transcribed and repeatedly read. Initial codes were generated from meaningful statements related to policy understanding, application experience, economic relief, academic support, identification problems, fairness concerns, and improvement suggestions (Lim, 2025). Similar codes were then grouped into sub-themes and further developed into main themes corresponding to the research objectives.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, member checking, and careful documentation of the analysis process (Alam, 2021). Interviews, observation, and documents were compared to strengthen the credibility of findings. Ethical principles were also followed. Participants were informed about the research purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Codes were used instead of real names to protect privacy.

Findings

This section presents the findings regarding the challenges encountered in implementing education subsidy policy for poor students at Shandong Huayu University of Technology. Based on thematic analysis of interview data, observation records, and institutional documents, five sub-themes were identified: (1) identification and recognition limitations; (2) stigma, privacy, and psychological pressure; (3) coverage and aid-intensity constraints; (4) evaluation fairness concerns; (5) insufficient developmental and educational support.

Table 4.1

Theme Analysis Coding

No.	Initial Codes	Sub-theme Codes	Main Codes	Theme
1	Difficulty identifying hidden poverty; Unrecognized unemployment-based hardship; Evidence-dependent access; Missing evidence causing disadvantage; Score-based identification; Acceptance of failed application; Data-assisted hidden poverty detection	Identification and recognition limitations	and Implementation Challenges	
2	Psychological barrier to disclosure; Privacy-sensitive help seeking; Non-application due to stigma; Uncertainty and application anxiety; Need for psychological support	Stigma, privacy, and psychological pressure	Implementation Challenges	
3	Limited quota; Gap between need and quota; Exclusion of moderately poor students; Insufficient amount for extreme hardship; Partial financial relief	Coverage and aid-intensity constraints	Implementation Challenges	
4	Disputes in class-level scoring; Concern about opportunistic application; Perceived transparency in selection; Fairness through layered review; Acceptance of failed application	Evaluation fairness concerns	Implementation Challenges	
5	Demand for developmental support; Upgrading work-study quality; Work-study as economic and developmental support; Learning-resource support; Need for psychological support	Insufficient developmental and educational support	Implementation Challenges	

Identification and Recognition Limitations

One major challenge identified in this study concerns the difficulty of accurately identifying students experiencing financial difficulties. Although the university has established formal procedures for identifying economically disadvantaged students, participants indicated that existing identification mechanisms cannot always fully capture students' actual financial conditions.

Counsellors explained that student poverty is often complex and dynamic. Some students may experience sudden financial difficulties because of family illness, unemployment, unexpected expenses, or changes in household conditions. However, the identification process mainly depends on application documents and family financial information provided by students.

“Some students may encounter sudden financial difficulties during their study, such as family illness, unexpected accidents, or temporary loss of family income. However, because these situations lack sufficient supporting documents, some students may find it difficult to receive timely financial assistance.”

(T2, Line 203)

“In some cases, students experience unexpected family difficulties that cannot be fully reflected in the submitted materials. Without relevant certificates or official proof, it is difficult for us to identify these students through the existing procedures, even though we know they may be facing real financial pressure.”

(T3, Line 209)

This indicates that policy implementation requires administrative procedures to be combined with professional judgement from counsellors.

Students also reported that formal documents may not always reflect their real economic situations. Some students experiencing temporary difficulties or hidden poverty may hesitate to apply because they believe their situations are difficult to explain through official materials.

“Some financial difficulties happen suddenly, such as family members becoming seriously ill or losing their jobs. However, these situations may not have official documents at the time of application. Without enough evidence, many students may feel that their difficulties cannot be recognized and may give up applying for assistance.”

(S12, Line 208)

“Not all poor families have obvious problems that can be shown through documents. Some families may experience temporary unemployment or unexpected expenses, but they may not meet the usual identification criteria. As a result, students with real financial pressure may not receive support when they need it.”

(S11, Line 212)

The researcher also attended the annual financial aid review meeting organised by the Student Affairs Office. During the meeting, staff members reviewed the implementation of the financial aid policy and discussed challenges encountered during the identification process, including hidden poverty, identification accuracy, and the need to improve supervision and dynamic recognition mechanisms.

(Observation at the Student Affairs Office, 18 March 2026)

At page 4-6, the document states that the identification of students with financial difficulties should follow standard procedures, including student applications, class democratic

evaluation, college review, university approval, and dynamic management. The document also requires supporting materials to be verified while ensuring fairness, openness, transparency, and privacy protection throughout the identification process.

(Document: Implementation Opinions on the Identification and Archive Management of Students with Financial Difficulties, 2026)

Therefore, identification and recognition limitations represent a major challenge because the implementation of subsidy policies requires universities to translate complex personal financial situations into standardized administrative categories.

Stigma, Privacy, and Psychological Pressure

The second challenge concerns the psychological experiences of students during the subsidy application process. Although financial assistance aims to support disadvantaged students, some participants expressed concerns that applying for subsidies may expose their family economic conditions and create feelings of embarrassment.

Several student participants mentioned that they worried about being viewed differently by classmates after receiving financial assistance.

"The biggest barrier is psychological. I do not want to expose my weakness in front of many people."

(S14, Line 218)

"Talking about family financial problems is uncomfortable because these are private matters."

(S15, Line 220)

"Some truly poor students may not apply because they fear discrimination." (S16, Line 219)

"I worried that others would think I was asking for sympathy."

(S7, Line 211)

Some students reported that concerns about privacy influenced their willingness to apply for financial assistance. They believed that financial difficulties were personal matters and were uncomfortable with procedures that required disclosure of family information.

Counsellors also recognized this issue. They explained that they needed to balance two requirements: ensuring transparency and fairness in evaluation while protecting students' dignity and privacy.

"Some students worry that classmates may know their family situation after they apply for financial aid."

(T2, Line 215)

"Some students only talk about their difficulties after repeated communication with counsellors."

(T3, Line 216)

The researcher observed a family financial difficulty identification meeting organised by the School of Management. During the meeting, counselors explained the identification criteria and application procedures before the evaluation began. Several students approached counselors individually to ask questions about family conditions, supporting materials, and eligibility requirements, while counselors provided further explanations privately.

(Observation at the School of Management, 8 February 2026)

At the page 2-4 & 7-8, another document specifies that counselors, review committees, and relevant administrative departments are responsible for verifying application materials, conducting evaluations according to formal procedures, and safeguarding students' privacy throughout the financial aid process.

(Document: 2026 Scholarship and Financial Aid Evaluation Work Plan of Shandong Huayu University of Technology, 2026)

Coverage and Aid-Intensity Constraints

The third challenge relates to the limited coverage and intensity of financial assistance.

Participants indicated that although the university provides various forms of financial support, available resources cannot always fully satisfy the needs of all economically disadvantaged students.

Counsellors mentioned that the number of students requiring assistance may exceed available quotas, creating difficulties in determining allocation priorities.

"The university provided financial assistance through grants, work-study programmes, home visits, and other support measures. However, the amount of financial assistance was often insufficient for students experiencing severe financial hardship."

(T2, Line 231)

Students also reported that financial assistance reduced some economic pressure but did not completely solve their financial difficulties.

"The coverage is not enough; many students apply, but only a few are selected. There are more students in difficulty than the number of available places. Some students may meet the requirements but still fail to receive support."

(S18, Line 243)

This issue was particularly significant for students facing high living expenses or serious family financial problems.

The researcher also attended the annual financial aid review meeting organised by the Student Affairs Office. During the meeting, staff members reviewed the implementation of the financial aid policy and discussed challenges related to increasing student demand, limited financial resources, and the allocation of available funding for financially aided students.

(Observation at the Student Affairs Office, 18 March 2026)

At the page 5 & 8, the document further indicates that financial aid is allocated according to approved quotas, annual funding arrangements, and institutional regulations. As a result, the number of beneficiaries and the amount of financial assistance available each year are subject to the available financial resources.

(Document: 2026 Scholarship and Financial Aid Evaluation Work Plan of Shandong Huayu University of Technology, 2026)

Evaluation Fairness Concerns

The fourth challenge concerns students' perceptions of fairness during subsidy evaluation.

Although the university has established evaluation procedures involving application review, class assessment, and institutional approval, some participants expressed concerns regarding whether evaluation standards were sufficiently transparent.

Students indicated that differences in family situations are sometimes difficult to compare objectively.

"Sometimes students feel that certain applicants are not actually facing serious difficulties. This creates doubts among other students. People begin questioning whether the evaluation is really fair."

(S19, Line 271)

"When the number of places is limited, everyone pays close attention to who receives support. If someone is considered undeserving, discussions quickly appear. Students become very sensitive to fairness issues."

(S17, Line 269)

Counsellors also noted that evaluation requires professional judgement because economic difficulties cannot always be measured through numerical indicators.

"There may be disputes during democratic evaluation and scoring. Students sometimes have different opinions regarding classmates' family situations. Because resources are limited, disagreements are almost unavoidable."

(T2, Line 270)

The researcher also attended the annual financial aid review meeting organised by the Student Affairs Office. During the meeting, university staff discussed issues related to fairness, transparency, supervision, and public confidence in the implementation of the financial aid policy. Participants also discussed ways to strengthen supervision mechanisms and improve procedural transparency in future financial aid work.

(Observation at the Student Affairs Office, 18 March 2026)

At page 4, the document states that the identification and evaluation process should follow standard procedures, including student application, class democratic evaluation, college review, university verification, and public announcement. The document also emphasises the principles of fairness, openness, transparency, and privacy protection throughout the identification process.

(Document: Implementation Opinions on the Identification and Archive Management of Students with Financial Difficulties, 2026)

Insufficient Developmental and Educational Support

The fifth challenge identified in this study is that current subsidy implementation mainly focuses on financial assistance, while developmental and educational support remains insufficient.

Participants acknowledged that financial aid helps students overcome immediate economic difficulties. However, some students believed that disadvantaged students also require support related to academic development, psychological adjustment, career planning, and employment preparation.

"More skills training and practical operation should be added. Students need not only financial support but also opportunities to improve themselves. Many poor students hope to become independent as soon as possible after graduation."

(S19, Line 290)

"Financial support solves current problems, but ability development determines future opportunities. Students hope to learn practical skills that can help with employment. This may be more valuable than temporary financial assistance."

(S18, Line 295)

Counsellors also indicated that their responsibilities are often concentrated on administrative management, including application review and information submission, while providing developmental support requires additional resources and institutional arrangements.

"For students with extreme family hardship, several thousand yuan may not solve much. Financial support can reduce pressure, but students still need support in many other areas. For example, career planning, skills training, and psychological support are equally important."

(T4, Line 291)

The researcher also attended the annual financial aid review meeting organised by the Student Affairs Office. During the meeting, university staff reviewed the implementation of the financial aid policy and discussed the need to further strengthen developmental financial aid and expand long-term support opportunities for students.

(Observation at the Student Affairs Office, 18 March 2026)

At the page 4 & 8, the document describes the university's financial aid system, including scholarships, grants, student loans, work-study programmes, and temporary hardship assistance. The document specifies the implementation arrangements for these financial aid programmes to support students' tuition fees and basic living needs.

(Document: 2026 Scholarship and Financial Aid Evaluation Work Plan of Shandong Huayu University of Technology, 2026)

Discussion

Policy Implementation Challenges: The Gap between Policy Goals and Institutional Practices

The findings of this study revealed that the implementation of education subsidy policy in private universities is influenced by the gap between policy expectations and institutional practices (Gu, 2024). Although national education subsidy policies emphasize educational equity and support for financially disadvantaged students, the actual implementation process requires universities to translate broad policy objectives into specific procedures, responsibilities, and operational practices.

This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that policy implementation is not merely a process of resource distribution but involves interpretation, coordination, and administrative decision-making (Sun & Wang, 2019). In the context of private universities, this challenge may become more prominent because institutions often face limitations in administrative resources and professional capacity. The present study further extends previous research by showing that implementation difficulties are not only related to institutional resources but also closely connected with the daily practices of counsellors and student affairs staff.

The findings indicated that counsellors played an important role in policy publicity, student consultation, material collection, and communication (Wu & Lei, 2023). However, their multiple responsibilities may influence the efficiency and consistency of policy implementation. This supports Smith's Policy Implementation Theory, which argues that policy outcomes are shaped by the interaction among policy itself, implementing organizations, target groups, and the surrounding environment (Zhang, Sun, & Xue, 2021). Therefore, the effectiveness of education subsidy policy depends not only on policy design but also on the capacity of universities to implement and adapt policies within specific institutional contexts.

Information Barriers and Unequal Access to Education Subsidy Information

The findings showed that insufficient policy communication was one of the challenges affecting the implementation of education subsidy policy (Wang, 2020). Some students experienced difficulties in understanding different types of financial assistance, application requirements, and procedures. This indicates that the availability of policy information does not necessarily guarantee students' effective access to financial support.

This finding supports previous research that students may encounter difficulties in understanding complex subsidy systems, particularly when policy information is presented through formal administrative channels rather than student-oriented communication approaches (Xu, 2025). For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, limited family educational resources and unfamiliarity with university administrative procedures may further increase information barriers.

However, this study provides additional evidence that information problems are not only a communication issue but also an issue of policy accessibility. In private universities, where students may have diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, effective implementation requires universities to provide continuous guidance rather than relying only on one-time policy announcements (Zancajo, Verger, & Fontdevila, 2022). Therefore, improving information

accessibility is an important condition for achieving the equity goals of education subsidy policies.

Difficulties in Identifying Financially Disadvantaged Students: The Challenge of Accurate Recognition

One of the significant findings of this study was that identifying financially disadvantaged students remained a major challenge in policy implementation. Although universities have established procedures involving application forms, financial documents, counsellor evaluations, and democratic reviews, accurately identifying students in need remains difficult (Zhang, 2024).

This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that poverty is a complex and dynamic condition that cannot always be accurately measured through formal income certificates (Zhang, 2018; Aziz et al., 2025). Some families may experience hidden economic difficulties caused by medical expenses, debt burdens, unstable employment, or sudden income loss, which may not be reflected in official documents.

The findings also revealed a tension between accuracy and subjectivity in the identification process. While multiple evaluation methods may improve recognition accuracy, they may also introduce personal judgement and inconsistencies (Zhong, 2020). This extends previous research by highlighting that poverty identification in private universities is not only an administrative procedure but also a process involving social understanding and interpersonal judgement.

From the perspective of educational equity, accurate identification is essential because incorrect identification may result in both exclusion of students who need support and inefficient allocation of financial resources (Qiao, 2021). Therefore, future implementation should consider more dynamic and comprehensive identification mechanisms.

Evaluation Fairness and Students' Trust in Subsidy Policy Implementation

The findings demonstrated that fairness concerns were an important challenge influencing students' perceptions of education subsidy policy implementation (Huang, 2019). Although universities generally followed established procedures, some students questioned whether evaluation standards were sufficiently clear and whether decisions were fully transparent.

This finding supports previous research emphasizing that fairness in policy implementation includes both procedural fairness and perceived fairness (Jin, Wu, & Liu, 2023). Procedural fairness focuses on whether institutions establish standardized criteria, review procedures, and supervision mechanisms. However, students' experiences and interpretations of these procedures also influence their trust in the policy.

The present study contributes to existing literature by showing that in private university contexts, perceived fairness may be particularly important because students often directly observe differences in subsidy outcomes among peers (Feng, 2022). When students lack understanding of evaluation criteria, even legitimate decisions may be interpreted as unfair. Therefore, enhancing transparency, explanation mechanisms, and student participation may improve trust and acceptance of subsidy policies.

Stigma, Privacy Concerns, and Psychological Pressure in the Implementation Process

The findings revealed that privacy concerns and psychological pressure represented another significant challenge in the implementation of education subsidy policies (Bao, 2020). Although public evaluation and announcement procedures are designed to ensure transparency and prevent misuse of financial resources, they may unintentionally expose students' economic difficulties.

This finding corresponds with previous studies showing that financial aid implementation involves a conflict between accountability and personal dignity (Stuardo & Cayuela, 2019). Students may experience embarrassment, anxiety, or fear of being labelled when their financial difficulties become known to others.

The present study further highlights that these psychological impacts may influence students' willingness to apply for financial assistance. Some eligible students may choose not to seek support because they want to protect their privacy or avoid negative social perceptions (Dong, 2020). Therefore, effective implementation should not only focus on identifying and supporting financially disadvantaged students but also consider students' emotional experiences and dignity. A more student-centred approach is needed, including confidential application procedures, discreet financial support mechanisms, and psychological assistance (Gu, 2024). Such approaches can help balance policy accountability with students' rights and well-being.

Conclusion and Implications*Conclusion*

This study examined the challenges encountered in implementing education subsidy policy for poor students in a private university in China (Chen, 2023). Through qualitative analysis of interviews, observations, and institutional documents, five major challenges were identified: identification and recognition limitations, stigma, privacy, and psychological pressure, coverage and aid-intensity constraints, evaluation fairness concerns, and insufficient developmental and educational support.

The findings demonstrate that education subsidy policy implementation is a complex process involving interactions among policy requirements, institutional practices, resource conditions, and student experiences (Liu, 2023). While subsidy policies provide important financial support for disadvantaged students, practical challenges remain in ensuring accurate identification, fair evaluation, sufficient assistance, and comprehensive student development.

By focusing on implementation challenges in a private university context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how education subsidy policies operate beyond formal policy documents (Sun, 2022). It highlights the importance of examining the experiences of both policy implementers and student beneficiaries when evaluating higher education support systems.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to policy implementation research by applying Smith's Policy Implementation Theory to the context of higher education financial aid (Li, 2021). The findings

demonstrate that implementation challenges emerge from interactions among: policy requirements; university administrative practices; student characteristics; institutional resource conditions (Zhang, 2024). The study therefore supports the argument that policy implementation should be examined as a dynamic process rather than a simple transfer of policy objectives into practice.

Practical Implications

The findings provide several implications for university administrators and policymakers. Universities should improve identification mechanisms by combining formal documentation with flexible assessment procedures to better recognize students experiencing complex financial difficulties (Xu, 2025). Universities should develop privacy-sensitive approaches during financial aid application and evaluation processes to reduce stigma and protect students' dignity. Institutions should enhance communication regarding evaluation standards to improve transparency and students' trust in subsidy procedures (Wang, 2020). Financial assistance should be connected with developmental support, including academic guidance, psychological services, and career development opportunities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on one private university, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other higher education institutions. Second, the study relies mainly on qualitative data from interviews, observations, and documents. Future research could combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine subsidy implementation across different types of universities (Guan, 2024). Third, future studies may compare public and private universities to explore how institutional differences influence education subsidy policy implementation.

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