

An Analysis of Implementation Strategies for Supporting Disadvantaged Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT : This study adopts a case study approach focusing on CTBC Business School in Taiwan, utilizing qualitative in-depth interviews with semi-structured guidelines to examine the implementation strategies for supporting disadvantaged students in their academic pursuits. This study aims to explore the challenges and demands faced by disadvantaged students. Five interviewees were selected, including the administrative supervisor responsible for student affairs, professionals from the counseling center, a course instructor, a student representative from disadvantaged backgrounds, and a supervisor from a social welfare organization. The interviews focused on three major themes including admission guidance, academic and daily-life support, and career planning and employment counseling. The findings indicate that CTBC Business School has demonstrated significant effectiveness in assisting disadvantaged students. Based on the findings, this study proposes the following recommendations including enhance admission outreach, relax eligibility criteria, optimize financial incentives, and improve administrative procedures.

Keywords - disadvantaged students, implementation strategies, academic support, educational equity, financial assistance

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, the expansion of higher education institutions and the impact of declining birth rates have posed significant challenges to university enrollment in Taiwan. Moreover, the widening socioeconomic gap has given rise to a range of issues affecting disadvantaged groups. Students from low-income households, indigenous communities, persons with disabilities, and those in special circumstances often face socioeconomic and cultural disadvantages that lead to multiple difficulties during the university application and study processes. Compared with their peers, these students require additional guidance and assistance to successfully complete higher education.

Previous research on socioeconomic inequality, educational equity, and social justice has emphasized that education plays a fundamental role in breaking social stratification, reducing class reproduction, and promoting upward social mobility. It is hoped that children from disadvantaged families can acquire professional skills and complete their education, thereby transforming their lives and avoiding the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

At the same time, the Taiwanese government has placed increasing emphasis on establishing support mechanisms for disadvantaged students. Since 2015, the Ministry of Education has implemented the Learning Assistance Subsidy Program for Disadvantaged Students in Universities, which includes special admission pathways to increase access to higher education and prevent disadvantaged students from being left behind at the starting point. In 2018, the Higher Education Sprout Project was launched, emphasizing public responsibility and social inclusion within higher education. Through these initiatives, diverse admission channels and financial support measures have been provided to students facing economic and cultural disadvantages. These efforts demonstrate that both government agencies and higher education institutions have invested considerable resources to establish a comprehensive support system which covering financial assistance, admission guidance, academic tutoring, and career planning, in order to promote educational justice and alleviate structural inequality.

1.2 Research Motivation and Purpose

Since its establishment, CTBC Business School has upheld the philosophy of supporting the disadvantaged and aims to cultivate globally oriented financial professionals equipped with technological literacy and international perspectives. Positioned as an international smart financial institution rooted in Taiwan, engaged in Asia, connected globally, and future-oriented, the school regards the support of disadvantaged students as one of its core institutional missions. It provides a wide range of assistance, including admission guidance, academic tutoring, living support, internship opportunities, career planning, and employment counseling. Through its commitment to social responsibility, the school seeks to offer comprehensive assistance to economically and culturally disadvantaged students, enabling them to achieve self-reliance and transform their lives, thus fulfilling the ideals of educational equity and social justice.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore how CTBC Business School supports disadvantaged students in their pursuit of higher education, to examine the problems and needs they encounter, and to develop effective measures and implementation strategies. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for institutional development and the Higher Education Sprout Project, thereby enhancing the mechanisms for assisting disadvantaged students and strengthening the school's efforts in promoting educational equity and social inclusion.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Disadvantaged students in higher education face multifaceted challenges including academic, social, and psychological barriers. Counseling and support programs are critical to facilitate their transition, persistence, and success in university settings. Research from the last decade highlights various counseling strategies and institutional efforts aimed at reducing disparities. Relevant research discusses the academic experiences, policy development, and support mechanisms for disadvantaged students. Prior studies have emphasized the role of education in preventing social stratification and promoting social mobility.

Woldegiorgis & Chiramba (2025) states that the qualitative study examines the barriers historically disadvantaged students, particularly black students, face in accessing and succeeding within South African higher education, focusing on epistemic access in humanities and sciences faculties. Drawing from empirical data collected through a mixed-methods approach at six institutions, the study analyzes interview transcripts from 34 students and 10 staff members. Using thematic analysis supported by MaxQDA software, the research identifies complex challenges such as navigating the admission process, overcoming financial constraints, and addressing language proficiency gaps. These factors hinder students' transition from basic education to university level. The findings highlight the critical role universities play in providing early, targeted support, identifying students at risk, and fostering partnerships with schools to enhance preparedness. The study also emphasizes the applicability of resilience theory as a framework to address social justice issues related to access and success. Ultimately, it advocates for the development of inclusive curricula and calls for sustained academic and social support to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Lowry (2019) investigates whether state government policies and institutions promote access to postsecondary education for economically disadvantaged students. By analyzing the proportion of state residents receiving federal Pell grants relative to the college-age population from low-income households between 1993 and 2008, separate models were estimated for total Pell recipients and those enrolled in public, private nonprofit, and proprietary institutions. The findings provide consistent evidence that state spending on both need and merit-based financial aid enhances access for economically disadvantaged students, with the effects of need-based aid proving larger and more robust. Additionally, students in states with consolidated governing boards show slightly greater access to public and nonprofit institutions compared to those with statewide coordinating boards. Enrollment patterns in the public and proprietary sectors also respond to opportunity costs of attending college, indicated by the state unemployment rate, while no direct impact was found from state policies restricting affirmative action or from the ideological leanings of political elites.

Fowle (2018) presents that the recent policy developments in England have placed increasing emphasis on broadening access and participation within higher education, particularly for mature students, positioning them as a priority group requiring tailored institutional support. The Office for Students identifies adult learners as one of five key areas where higher education providers must allocate targeted resources to enable equitable access and success. However, despite research indicating that adult learners are a heterogeneous population with diverse needs and experiences, existing support initiatives often adopt a uniform approach centered on enhancing academic confidence and study skills, thereby overlooking the complexity of learners' socio-educational backgrounds. In response to this gap, current research examines the student voice and the contextual barriers faced by disadvantaged adult learners within a part-time, distance-learning institution. Employing a life-history methodological orientation, one-to-one telephone interviews were conducted with twelve students who completed the Access program before pursuing a full degree. The sample included individuals with no previous

higher education experience, low prior qualifications, and from POLAR3 quintiles 1 and 2, all of whom received full fee waivers. Vignettes were incorporated to facilitate discussion and address ethical concerns raised during institutional review. Thematic analysis using NVivo enabled interrogation of students' experiences, generating insights to inform policy and practice aimed at enhancing support for mature learners in higher education.

Danic (2015) focuses on both quantitative and qualitative data from the GOETE European research project conducted across eight European countries, scholars have examined how disadvantaged students navigate the transition to higher education at the end of lower secondary schooling. The study frames disadvantage through an intersectional lens, demonstrating that access to higher education is shaped not only by national educational regulations but also by the discourses of educational professionals and the attitudes held by students themselves. These professional discourses, often embedded in normative expectations and institutional representations, construct hierarchies based on social class, ethnicity, and gender, thereby positioning students within unequal trajectories of educational opportunity. In schools situated in socioeconomically deprived areas, such distinctions are experienced through processes of stigmatization and discrimination, which in turn influence the ways in which students develop agency in response to their life circumstances. The study highlights that student agency is neither uniform nor static but emerges through interactions between structural constraints and personal aspirations. By analyzing these dynamics, the research reveals how institutional practices and social perceptions contribute to the reproduction of inequalities in access to higher education, underscoring the need for policies and support mechanisms that recognize the complex interplay between structural forces and individual agency among disadvantaged learners.

Lavhelani, Ndebele & Ravhuhali (2020) indicates that within the context of a historically disadvantaged rural South African university, recent research has investigated the institutional capacity to support first-year students who are academically at risk of failing in higher education. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the study explored existing academic support frameworks, monitoring mechanisms, and the attitudes of lecturers toward supporting at-risk learners. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire administered to 100 at-risk students, 20 lecturers, and one Information Management System Officer directly involved in managing first-year student support. The findings revealed significant inadequacies within the institutional support structure, as both students and lecturers reported uncertainty regarding the availability or accessibility of academic support services. Furthermore, the study highlighted weak communication channels, limited training for mentors, and insufficient monitoring processes to evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions. These results underscore the systemic challenges faced by higher education institutions serving marginalized populations, particularly in rural contexts where resources and awareness of support mechanisms are constrained. The study recommends enhanced promotion of academic support programs, structured mentor training, and rigorous evaluation of support strategies to ensure their relevance and impact. Such insights contribute to broader discussions on equity and student success in higher education, particularly for those entering from disadvantaged educational backgrounds.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative interviews are among the most widely used data collection methods in social science research (Mohajan, 2018). It focuses primarily on participants' personal feelings, life experiences, and narratives. Through interactive dialogue between the researcher and the participants, the researcher is able to gain insight into, understand, and interpret the participants' perceptions of social realities (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020).

Moreover, this study employed the in-depth interview method, which is frequently utilized in qualitative research. It relies on verbal communication between the interviewer and the interviewee to facilitate the exchange and construction of ideas (Voutsina, 2018). This interaction usually occurs on an individual basis, allowing participants to reflect on their motivations, beliefs, attitudes, practices, and perspectives during the interview process. A semi-structured format was adopted for the interviews. The interview follows a defined theme, and although the structure of the questions is flexible, the focus remains clear rather than open-ended (Karatsareas, 2022). An interview guide or outline is prepared in advance, but the questions can evolve during the conversation according to the interviewees' responses, allowing considerable flexibility in both the order and form of inquiry. In addition, the interviewer is not required to use fixed wording or expressions; instead, the flow of the interview is guided primarily by the interviewees' responses (Adedoyin, 2020).

3.2 Research Design

This study employed in-depth qualitative interviews using a semi-structured format to investigate the needs and implementation strategies of academic support for disadvantaged students at CTBC Business School. This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by disadvantaged students during their educational journey, identify their specific needs, and construct corresponding support mechanisms and execution strategies.

Five interview participants were selected, including: the unit supervisor in charge of disadvantaged student services at the office of student affairs, a professional staff member from the counseling center, a course instructor, a student representative from a disadvantaged background, and a unit director from a social welfare organization.

To ensure flexible and informative data collection, purposive sampling was adopted based on the research objectives. Three major thematic interview guides were established including admission guidance, academic and life support, and career planning and employment counseling. These thematic interview guides were designed to facilitate systematic exploration of the needs, challenges, and potential strategies for assisting disadvantaged students.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interview findings indicate that CTBC Business School has developed systematic support mechanisms across departments. Disadvantaged students receive financial assistance, academic tutoring, emotional support, and career counseling. However, further improvements are needed regarding eligibility criteria and employment incentives.

Based on the analysis of interview data, the five interviewees discussed three major themes including admission guidance, academic and life counseling, and career planning and employment support. They examined the challenges and needs encountered by disadvantaged students and evaluated the response measures and implementation strategies provided by the school. The interview results indicate that CTBC Business School has consistently upheld its philosophy of supporting the disadvantaged and has made substantial efforts to provide comprehensive assistance to disadvantaged students since its establishment. The school has implemented these initiatives for many years with significant outcomes.

A standardized operating procedure has been established for the assistance programs, supported by collaborative efforts across the office of academic affairs, office of student affairs, financial training division, and various academic departments. Faculty and administrative staff work together to guide students through admission, provide financial support and scholarships, offer academic tutoring and life counseling after enrollment, and ensure adequate career planning and employment counseling prior to graduation. Through corporate matchmaking, disadvantaged students are assisted in securing suitable employment opportunities, thereby achieving self-reliance and upward social mobility.

Despite these achievements, the interview findings suggest that there remains room for improvement. As noted by Interviewee E, a supervisor from the social welfare agency, disadvantaged students often demonstrate weaker academic performance due to socioeconomic and cultural disadvantages. It was suggested that the school may consider lowering admission thresholds or adopting diversified admission criteria to reduce the weight of standardized exam scores, thereby providing disadvantaged students with a greater opportunity to be admitted and receive financial assistance.

Similarly, Interviewee A from the office of student affairs stated that current financial aid is mainly provided at the undergraduate level. The school offers the "Hope Scholarship" to students from low-income, indigenous, disabled, or special circumstances backgrounds, covering tuition, housing, and meal fees, in addition to a monthly stipend. The eligibility criteria have been further expanded to include students with financial hardship not officially recognized under government definitions. These students may receive equivalent financial support after undergoing a home visit and needs assessment conducted by school personnel. The interviewee recommended that, when sufficient resources are available, the scope of eligibility be further expanded to include postgraduate students, ensuring that disadvantaged individuals have continued access to higher education.

Moreover, Interviewee D, a student representative, expressed the hope of obtaining employment that offers fair compensation and proximity to their home, enabling them to support their families. At present, the school provides financial aid as well as academic and life counseling for disadvantaged students; however, the criteria for career guidance and job placement are the same for all students. If employers do not provide additional incentives specifically for disadvantaged students, there will be no guaranteed placements or financial subsidies during employment matching. Additionally, geographical distance from home may become a significant obstacle for disadvantaged students who must simultaneously work and care for their families. Therefore, it was recommended that the school seek more supportive and accessible employment opportunities for disadvantaged students in future job-matching initiatives.

Finally, interviews with Interviewee B from the counseling center and Interviewee C, a faculty member, confirmed that the school has established a comprehensive standard operating procedure and cross-unit collaboration in supporting disadvantaged students. The current assistance mechanisms have proven effective; however, it was emphasized that the school should not be complacent. The successful elements should be maintained, while deficiencies should be critically reviewed and refined. It is recommended that future support for disadvantaged students be further professionalized and refined, ensuring full realization of the school's guiding principle of supporting the disadvantaged.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

In recent years, the combined impact of the expansion of higher education institutions and declining birth rates has created substantial challenges for small and medium-sized private universities located in remote areas of Taiwan. Government funding is typically prioritized for national universities or large private institutions, which places schools such as ours at a relative disadvantage when competing for financial resources. Fortunately, CTBC Business School was established through funding from CTBC Financial Holding, which has continuously provided financial resources and support, thereby enabling the sustainable operation of the institution.

Guided by the principle of supporting the disadvantaged, the school has maintained an enduring commitment to providing academic support and financial assistance to disadvantaged students. Since its establishment, approximately 8% to 10% of enrolled students each year have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and nearly one hundred students have received full tuition, housing, and meal fee waivers, along with monthly stipends. Support services have been collaboratively provided by the office of academic affairs, the office of student affairs, the financial training division, and academic departments. These services include admission guidance, financial aid, academic and life counseling, and career planning before graduation, with corporate matchmaking to help students secure ideal employment opportunities. These efforts contribute to fostering student self-reliance and enabling upward social mobility.

The findings indicate that CTBC Business School has demonstrated significant effectiveness in assisting disadvantaged students since its establishment. With adequate financial support and resources in the future, the school should continue to expand and refine these initiatives, further strengthening its assistance mechanisms to promote educational equity and social inclusion.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

5.2.1 Strengthen Admission Outreach

Although CTBC Business School has been established for over a decade since its restructuring in 2015, many students and parents remain unaware of the school and its financial aid programs for disadvantaged students. Therefore, it is recommended that the school strengthen its recruitment strategies by actively contacting high school counseling offices and social welfare institutions, and organizing promotional activities through multiple channels to identify potential student candidates who are in need of assistance. This will allow economically disadvantaged students to access higher education and transform their lives through academic achievement.

5.2.2 Relax Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility for disadvantaged student status is typically determined by government regulations, which may exclude individuals in genuine need of support. When resources permit, the school may consider expanding the eligibility criteria to include students who may not meet the official requirements but clearly demonstrate financial need. For example, assistance could be extended to postgraduate students, or admission criteria could be adjusted such as lowering exam score thresholds or adopting multi-dimensional evaluation methods. It is intended to provide greater opportunities for disadvantaged students to enter higher education and receive financial support.

5.2.3 Optimize Financial Assistance

With inflation and rising living costs in recent years, financial burdens have increased for all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some students not only need to sustain themselves at school but also contribute to their family's income through part-time work or caretaking responsibilities. When resources allow, the school may improve its financial assistance measures by providing additional internships or paid work opportunities alongside tuition and living subsidies. Furthermore, during job matchmaking, the school may help disadvantaged students secure well-paid employment opportunities near their homes to balance financial stability with family responsibilities.

5.2.4 Refine Administrative Procedures

Although the current procedures for assisting disadvantaged students are well-established, it is advised that all staff maintain a spirit of continuous improvement. Effective practices should be retained, while areas requiring refinement should be reviewed. Future administrative processes should aim for greater professionalism and efficiency by simplifying complex procedures and improving operational effectiveness, ensuring smoother implementation of support services.

Finally, it is expected that the findings of this study will serve as a valuable reference for future studies, institutional development, and higher education initiatives aimed at supporting disadvantaged students. This study also seeks to contribute to the ongoing enhancement of assistance programs at CTBC Business School, promoting social justice and educational equity.

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