

# Educational support for disadvantaged students in Vietnamese higher education

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## Article Info

### Article history:

Received Jan 7, 2026

Revised Apr 30, 2026

Accepted May 19, 2026

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### Keywords:

Disadvantaged student groups  
Educational equity  
Educational support activities  
Higher education management  
Social inequality

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how social inequality is shaped; to determine the scope and evaluate the effectiveness of educational support programs for disadvantaged students in Vietnamese higher education. The study employs a mixed-methods design, combining document analysis, a questionnaire survey with 227 participants from 10 universities, and semi-structured interviews with 16 administrators, faculty members, and students. Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to clarify educational institutions' practices and implementation gaps. The results show that support activities remain primarily focused on scholarships and financial aid, while academic support, psychological counseling, and capacity-building services are fragmented and not fully integrated into the management systems of higher education institutions. The study also indicates that inequality exists not only through economic disadvantage but also through deficiencies in cultural capital, learning skills, social support, and access to educational resources. From a theoretical perspective, the findings further clarify the theory of social reproduction and equity-oriented educational governance by showing that inequality is also reproduced through fragmented support governance. The conclusion is that support for disadvantaged students needs to be managed as an integrated, multidimensional, and systemic equity mechanism, rather than as isolated welfare interventions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, social inequality has ceased to be a localized phenomenon and has become a global characteristic of higher education. The expansion of enrollment and increased participation rates in higher education in many countries was once expected to contribute to the democratization of education; however, reality shows that expanding access to education does not equate to reducing inequality. Many international studies indicate that in systems with high participation rates, inequality shifts from “who gets into university” to “who can complete their studies and graduate on time” [1], [2]. The increasingly pronounced disparities in opportunities to access, maintain, and complete university programs among different student groups have posed new challenges for higher education management in the current context.

Empirical evidence shows that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are at a higher risk of dropping out, have longer study periods, and achieve lower academic results compared to students from more privileged backgrounds, even in supposedly equitable education systems [3], [4]. Educational

disparities cannot be explained solely by differences in income or tuition affordability. They are also deeply shaped by variations in cultural capital, academic preparedness, and students' capacity to navigate university environments that largely reflect the values and expectations of middle- and upper-class groups [5]. Within this framework, higher education embodies a fundamental tension: while it is widely viewed as a key driver of upward social mobility, it may simultaneously reinforce existing inequalities when inclusive and well-designed support structures are insufficient [6].

In many countries, equitable policies in admissions or financial aid have been implemented to mitigate entry inequality. However, studies show that equitable policies focusing solely on access without emphasizing the learning process can inadvertently maintain or even reinforce inequality [7], [8]. For example, disadvantaged students, even those admitted through preferential mechanisms, still struggle to adapt to the academic demands, assessments, and university culture, leading to feelings of alienation and self-doubt [9], [10]. These experiences reflect a mismatch between the social context of disadvantaged students and the university environment, a factor identified as a core cause of inequality in educational outcomes [6].

In higher education practice, disadvantaged student groups include students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students from remote areas, ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, or those lacking socio-cultural capital. Even after overcoming initial access barriers, they still face numerous challenges in their studies. A student who has to work part-time to cover living expenses often struggles to maintain academic focus and fully participate in supplementary learning activities. A student with a disability may encounter obstacles in accessing learning spaces or academic resources if the university lacks appropriate support. These difficulties, if not identified and addressed promptly, can easily lead to the risk of dropping out or achieving poor academic results [11], [12].

Although many higher education institutions have implemented support activities such as scholarships, grants, academic counseling, or psychological support, these activities are often fragmented, lacking coordination, and not placed within a unified educational management framework. Several studies indicate that supporting disadvantaged students requires not only financial resources but also coordination among academic departments, student services, and school-level management to create a sustainable impact [8], [13]. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, inequality in public higher education and learning opportunities among student groups is also becoming a worrying issue, especially in the context of rapid urbanization and increasingly pronounced regional disparities [14], [15].

Stemming from the theoretical and practical issues, this study aims to analyze the forms of educational support for disadvantaged students in higher education in Vietnam, while clarifying the relationship between social inequality and the design and organization of support mechanisms. Through an educational management perspective, the study seeks to propose directions to improve the effectiveness of support, shifting from fragmented interventions to a systematic and truly equitable support model. Based on this, the study focuses on answering questions related to identifying the forms of social inequality that most strongly impact disadvantaged students in higher education, how current support activities are organized in practice, and necessary adjustments in educational management to ensure that higher education truly acts as a tool to narrow, rather than reproduce, social inequality.

This study contributes to the field of educational equity research by shifting the analytical focus from individual support measures to integrated governance structures and support ecosystems in higher education. Through a mixed-methods design and a multi-stakeholder approach, the paper provides empirical evidence on how organizational mechanisms can inadvertently reproduce inequality, and proposes a governance model aimed at achieving substantive equity in the Vietnamese context. To guide the analysis more clearly, this study focused on addressing the following research questions:

- What forms of social inequality most strongly affect disadvantaged students in Vietnamese higher education? (RQ1)
- How are current educational support activities designed, implemented, and experienced by key target groups? (RQ2)
- Do existing support activities function as an integrated equality mechanism or are they merely fragmented responses from organizations? (RQ3)

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Research on inequality in higher education

Inequality in higher education has long been a central theme of comparative education research and the sociology of education, especially in the context of higher education shifting towards a highly participatory model. Classical and contemporary studies often distinguish three main approaches: educational equity, equity of opportunity, and equity of outcomes. Educational equity emphasizes the principle that all individuals have the right to access and benefit from education. In contrast, equity of opportunity focuses on

minimizing the influence of social background on access to higher education. However, an increasing number of studies indicate that equity of opportunity, if limited to entry, is insufficient to address systemic inequality, and therefore the focus should shift to equity of outcomes, that is, the ability to sustain learning, complete programs, and obtain social benefits from higher education [1], [2].

In systems with high enrollment rates, inequality does not disappear but tends to restructure, shifting from entry-level selection to internal stratification within the system. Araki [2] showed that the expansion of higher education is accompanied by uneven skill diffusion, putting students from lower socioeconomic groups at a disadvantage in acquiring the skills necessary to succeed at higher education. Similarly, studies in Australia and Europe show that even with expanded admission opportunities, social background remains a strong predictor of academic achievement and graduation potential [3], [4].

Another important research direction highlights the role of structural inequality and exclusionary mechanisms in higher education systems. Catalán *et al.* [7] pointed out that even policies designed for equity can inadvertently re-emerge inequality if they operate within an already stratified educational structure. Academic evaluation criteria, teaching standards, and school culture often reflect middle-class values, putting students from disadvantaged social groups at a disadvantage from the outset [16]–[18]. This shows that inequality in higher education is not only a policy issue but also a structural and cultural institutional issue.

## 2.2. Research on disadvantaged students in higher education

In parallel with macro-level studies on inequality, many works focus directly on disadvantaged students as a central research subject. This group is often identified through interwoven criteria, including family socioeconomic conditions, cultural and social capital, regional origin, gender, ethnicity, disability status, and living space. Fitzgerald *et al.* [19] pointed out that disadvantaged students rarely experience only a single form of disadvantage but often face multiple overlapping layers of disadvantage.

Educational socio-psychological studies show that the barriers faced by disadvantaged students are not only physical but also have psychological and symbolic dimensions. Swietlik *et al.* [9] clearly demonstrate how social status significantly influences the learning process in university environments, creating conflicts of interest that often disadvantage disadvantaged groups. These experiences easily lead to feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and reduced self-regulation of learning. Subsequent studies have shown that disadvantaged students tend to “internalize” their low social status, negatively impacting motivation and learning performance [10], [20].

In addition, barriers to learning and school integration are also reflected in the higher risk of dropping out and longer study periods for disadvantaged students. Li and Carroll [11] pointed out that, in Australia, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often have to balance studying and working to earn a living, leading to reduced participation in academics and extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, extracurricular activities have been shown to play an important role in regulating inequalities in cognitive and non-cognitive skills, but disadvantaged students often have fewer opportunities to participate due to limitations in time, finances, and information [21], [22]. The practice in Vietnam also reflects a similar trend, where students from remote areas or low-income families face many difficulties in accessing learning resources and informal support networks [14], [15].

## 2.3. Theoretical framework used in the research

Firstly, the theory of social reproduction in education, which posits that education is not only a tool for social mobility but also a mechanism for maintaining and recreating class structures through favoring certain forms of cultural and social capital. Historical and contemporary studies show that higher education often reinforces the advantages of social groups already possessing cultural and academic capital, while disadvantaged students have to work harder to achieve the same results [23], [24].

Secondly, the research applies the theory of social equity in educational management, emphasizing the difference between formal equality and substantive equity. From this perspective, policies supporting students need to be designed based on the specific needs of each group, rather than being applied uniformly to all learners [25], [26]. Empirical evidence shows that support programs combining financial, academic, and psychological assistance are more effective than single interventions [8], [13].

Thirdly, the study approaches the issue from a systems perspective in educational management, considering student support activities as a component of the school’s development strategy. This approach highlights the integration of instructional practices, learner support systems, and institutional governance to generate long-term, sustainable outcomes, instead of relying on short-term or ad hoc assistance measures [27]. The combination of social reproduction theory, educational equity, and a systems approach allows the study not only to describe the current state of support for disadvantaged students but also to deeply analyze the mechanisms that create and maintain inequality in higher education, thereby providing a basis for proposing management directions towards genuine educational equity.

## 2.4. Theoretical contributions

This study does not merely view social inequality as a fundamental condition of higher education; instead, it offers a clearer theoretical explanation of how inequality is reproduced through the management of educational support systems in universities. First, the findings extend the theory of social reproduction by showing that unequal outcomes are perpetuated not only by enrollment structures or inherited cultural capital, but also by the fragmented organization of support services within universities. In other words, the institutional structure of the support system itself can become an adverse reproduction mechanism when it operates in a one-sided, slow-reacting, and poorly coordinated manner among stakeholders.

Second, this study refines the theory of equitable educational management by demonstrating that true equity cannot be achieved solely through financial aid. Equity only becomes meaningful when educational support is designed as a multi-faceted intervention, encompassing financial aid, academic guidance, psychosocial support, access to learning resources, and career development. This shifts the analytical focus from individual support measures to the quality of institutional coordination and implementation.

Third, this study integrates social regeneration theory, educational equity, and systems thinking into a single analytical lens. Through this integration, the paper proposes the idea of integrated support governance as a conceptual framework for evaluating how higher education institutions respond to the needs of disadvantaged students. Accordingly, the paper argues that support activities should not be understood as secondary welfare services but as core organizational mechanisms to prevent the reproduction of inequality in higher education.

## 3. METHOD

### 3.1. Research design

This study was conducted using a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively analyze support activities for disadvantaged students in higher education. The mixed-methods design was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, quantitative data from questionnaire surveys allowed for the identification of general trends, levels of consensus, and assessments among relevant groups. Secondly, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and text analysis provided deeper insights into the quantitative results, clarifying the practical context and addressing issues difficult to quantify. The integration of multiple data sources allowed for triangulation, thereby enhancing the reliability and inference value of the study.

Technical selection process and exclusion criteria: participant selection was conducted in three steps. First, 10 higher education institutions were contacted through formal academic relationships and invited to participate in the study. Second, within each institution, the research team coordinated with the units responsible for student affairs, academic administration, or faculty administration to identify potential participants who met the criteria based on predefined roles. Third, invitation forms were distributed directly or through each school's team, and participation was confirmed on a voluntary basis after respondents were informed of the research objectives, confidentiality conditions, and expected completion time.

To increase the relevance and reliability of the dataset, several exclusion criteria were applied. Respondents were excluded if they did not belong to one of the three target groups, had less than one semester of school experience, submitted incomplete questionnaires, or reported a lack of knowledge about student support activities. For the student group, respondents who had no direct experience with university support mechanisms and were unable to evaluate the items surveyed were not retained in the final dataset.

### 3.2. Questionnaire survey method

The questionnaire survey was used as the primary tool to collect quantitative data on the perceptions, experiences, and evaluations of stakeholders regarding support activities for disadvantaged students.

#### 3.2.1. Participant selection criteria

Purposive sampling was applied to ensure the participation of groups holding different roles within the higher education system. The specific selection criteria were as:

- Administrative staff: those responsible for student affairs, scholarship policies, financial aid, or training management at higher education institutions.
- Faculty staff: those with teaching experience and/or academic advising, and direct contact with disadvantaged students.
- Students: those currently enrolled at the surveyed universities, including students who have accessed or need access to support programs.

The survey involved a total of 227 participants from 10 universities, including 37 administrators (16.30%), 74 lecturers (32.60%), and 116 students (51.10%). This structure relatively fully reflects the stakeholder structure in higher education and allows for a comparison of perspectives between the policy-making and implementation groups and the beneficiary group.

### 3.2.2. Measurement and data processing tools

A 5-point Likert scale was used as the primary measurement tool: for variables measuring level of agreement, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For variables evaluating quality: from 1 (poor) to 5 (good). To facilitate descriptive statistical analysis, the scale was converted into an interval scale with class width calculated using (1):

$$x = \frac{\text{Maximum value} - \text{Minimum value}}{\text{Measurement level}} = 0.8 \quad (1)$$

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics (mean value, standard deviation) and comparative analysis between groups of subjects.

## 3.3. Collection and analysis of qualitative data

### 3.3.1. Text analysis

Content analysis was conducted on policy documents, strategies, and regulations related to educational equity and support for disadvantaged students. Sources include: higher education development strategy; regulations on scholarships and financial aid; student services policy; intervention programs at the grassroots level. Text analysis helps identify the institutional framework and policy direction, thereby comparing it with practical implementation.

### 3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants, including 4 management staff (coded: CBQL01–CBQL04), 6 lecturers (coded GV01–GV06), and 6 students (coded SV01–SV06). The coding aims to ensure anonymity and ease of citation in the results. The interview framework revolves around three main content groups: awareness of inequality and disadvantaged students in higher education; evaluation of current support activities; and proposed improvements from a practical perspective. All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Topics were coded according to the process: full text reading, identifying semantic units, coding groups, topic formation, and comparison between groups of subjects.

## 3.4. Data integration and validation

Quantitative and qualitative data are integrated at the results interpretation stage. Survey findings are compared with interview data and text analysis to: verify consistency between policy and practice; clarify data trends with qualitative evidence; identify gaps in support mechanisms. This multi-source and multi-method approach contributes to enhancing the reliability, systematicity, and academic depth of the research. Interviews were fully recorded and processed using thematic analysis. Combining qualitative data from interviews with quantitative data from surveys and text analysis allowed the study to approach the issue from multiple perspectives, thereby enhancing the reliability and depth of the conclusions drawn.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Forms of social inequality affecting disadvantaged students

Recent studies have shown that inequality in higher education extends beyond access to learning and completion of programs. Study by Araki [2] showed that in education systems with high participation rates, expanding university size does not automatically reduce inequality without accompanying support mechanisms. Similarly, other studies [1], [3] affirmed that socioeconomic background remains a strong predictor of dropout risk and academic outcomes. At the micro level, research by Palou *et al.* [28] emphasized the role of skills and extracurricular activities in amplifying or mitigating the disadvantages faced by disadvantaged students. Based on that, Table 1 presents the forms of social inequality that directly affect disadvantaged students in higher education through empirical surveys.

Table 1. Forms of social inequality affecting disadvantaged students (from June to November 2025)

Order	Survey content	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{X}$
1	Economic difficulties and tuition costs faced by disadvantaged students	2.6	6.2	18.5	39.6	33.1	3.94
2	Limitations in cultural capital and higher education skills for disadvantaged students	3.1	7.9	26.4	38.8	23.8	3.72
3	Disadvantages due to remote, rural, or ethnic minority backgrounds	4.0	9.7	24.2	36.6	25.5	3.70
4	Difficulties in accessing technology and learning resources for disadvantaged students	5.3	11.0	27.8	34.4	21.5	3.56
5	Psychological pressure, low self-esteem, and feelings of marginalization for disadvantaged students	4.4	10.1	25.1	37.0	23.4	3.65
6	Limitations in participation in extracurricular activities and skill development for disadvantaged students	3.5	8.8	29.1	36.1	22.5	3.65
7	Lack of social support networks and academic guidance for disadvantaged students	2.2	7.0	23.3	41.4	26.1	3.82

The survey results in Table 1 show that economic inequality was rated as the most significant factor impacting disadvantaged students, with the highest average score ( $\bar{X}=3.94$ ). Over 72% of respondents chose “impact” and “completely impactful”, reflecting the reality that many students have to work while studying to cover living and study expenses. In supplementary interviews, one student shared that prolonged part-time work often led to absences from group study sessions and insufficient time for preparation, despite recognizing the importance of these activities.

Besides economic factors, a lack of cultural capital and higher-level academic skills was also considered a significant barrier ( $\bar{X}=3.72$ ). Disadvantaged students, especially first-generation university students, often struggle with accessing self-study methods, academic writing, and academic communication with instructors. This makes them more susceptible to passivity and low self-esteem in the university environment. Remote and rural backgrounds, as well as limited access to technology and learning resources, were also assessed as factors with relatively high impact, with average scores of 3.70 and 3.56, respectively. Some survey participants indicated that disparities in technological infrastructure and pre-university learning conditions meant that students from these areas took longer to adapt to modern academic demands.

Notably, indicators related to psychological pressure, feelings of marginalization, and lack of social support networks all had average scores above 3.6. This suggests that inequality exists not only in tangible forms but also manifests in subtle, long-lasting psychological experiences. Many disadvantaged students reported that they sought less support from faculty or student services due to fear of judgment or lack of knowledge about available support channels.

Overall, the survey results reflect that forms of social inequality affect disadvantaged students in a multifaceted and overlapping way, where economic factors play a fundamental but inseparable role from cultural, psychological, and social network disadvantages. These findings provide an important empirical basis for further analysis of the effectiveness of educational support activities and educational management orientation in the following sections of the study.

#### 4.2. Current status of educational support activities in higher education

Recent international studies show that the effectiveness of support activities for disadvantaged students strongly depends on the level of coverage, integration, and management methods at the institutional level. Devlin *et al.* [13] pointed out that financial support only has a sustainable effect when accompanied by academic support and individual counseling. From a general perspective, Herbaut and Geven [8] also affirmed that fragmented support programs often have a limited impact on reducing inequality. At the psychological, well-being, and integration level, other studies [5], [9] showed that first-generation students often face “invisible” disadvantages if they lack support mechanisms appropriate to their living context. Research results in Vietnam also reflect similar challenges in implementing student support [29]. Based on this, Table 2 reflects the current state of educational support activities in higher education.

Table 2. Current state of educational support activities in higher education (from June to November 2025)

Order	Survey content	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{X}$
1	Financial support, scholarships, and tuition fee waivers for students	2.6	6.2	18.5	39.6	33.1	3.94
2	Academic support (academic advising, tutoring, study guidance) from faculty and departments within the university	3.1	7.9	26.4	38.8	23.8	3.72
3	Psychological support and individual counseling for students	4.0	9.7	24.2	36.6	25.5	3.70
4	Support in accessing technology and learning resources during their studies	5.3	11.0	27.8	34.4	21.5	3.56
5	Support in participating in extracurricular activities and developing soft skills and professional skills	4.4	10.1	25.1	37.0	23.4	3.65
6	Career guidance and job placement support during and after graduation	3.5	8.8	29.1	36.1	22.5	3.65

The survey results in Table 2 show that financial support, scholarships, and tuition fee waivers are the most clearly and effectively implemented activities, with the highest average score ( $\bar{X}=3.87$ ). Nearly 70% of survey participants rated the support as “fair” and “good”. This reflects the fact that scholarship, grant, and tuition fee waiver policies are often the top priority for higher education institutions when targeting disadvantaged students. In a supplementary interview, one student stated that scholarship support helped them maintain their studies during a financially difficult period, even while working part-time to cover living expenses.

Conversely, psychological support and individual counseling activities were rated the lowest, with an average score of only 3.02. The percentage of those choosing “no support activities” and “poor support” accounted for over 33%, indicating that this area is still quite limited in practice. Some survey participants felt that while psychological counseling services exist in name, they are not truly accessible or trustworthy enough for students to proactively seek help when facing difficulties.

Academic support activities, access to technology and learning resources, as well as support for participation in extracurricular activities and skill development, all received average scores ranging from 3.27 to 3.44. This indicates that these activities have been implemented at a moderately good level, but are not uniform across higher education institutions and do not fully meet the needs of disadvantaged students. One lecturer participating in the survey shared that many tutoring or academic support programs are still spontaneous, depending on the individual responsibility of lecturers rather than a well-organized support mechanism at the university level. Regarding career guidance and job placement support, the average score was 3.23, reflecting the existence of activities such as career workshops and job fairs, but the level of personalization for disadvantaged students remains limited. Some students reported receiving little specific advice on career paths suitable to their personal circumstances, leading to feelings of confusion as they prepare for graduation.

Overall, the survey results show that higher education institutions have made certain efforts in implementing educational support activities, especially in the financial aspect. However, long-term development support forms, such as in-depth academic support, psychological support, and career guidance, have not received adequate investment and lack coordination within a unified educational management framework. This is an important basis for a deeper analysis of the effectiveness and limitations of support activities in the following discussion.

### 4.3. Limitations in managing support activities

Many studies indicate that limitations in managing support activities for disadvantaged students stem not only from a lack of resources but also from the way policies are organized and coordinated. Fitzgerald *et al.* [19] showed that many higher education systems lack an integrated management framework, leading to fragmented support programs. From a policy perspective, previous studies [2], [7] emphasized that equity mechanisms, if not closely monitored, can inadvertently reproduce inequality. At the grassroots level, other studies [13], [27] pointed out challenges related to costs, personnel, and inter-unit coordination in implementing support. Furthermore, Herbaut [30] showed that a lack of long-term monitoring undermines the effectiveness of interventions. Based on this, Table 3 reflects the prominent limitations in the current management of educational support activities.

Table 3. Limitations in the management of educational support activities (from June to November 2025)

Order	Survey content	1	2	3	4	5	$\bar{X}$
1	Lack of a comprehensive strategy at the higher education level leads to fragmented support activities for disadvantaged students, depending on individual units or individuals, and not aligned with the long-term development goals of the university.	6.2	18.1	32.6	29.5	13.6	3.26
2	Coordination between functional departments, faculties, and student services is limited.	5.7	17.6	31.3	30.8	14.6	3.31
3	The identification and classification of disadvantaged students are not based on clear and up-to-date criteria.	4.4	15.9	33.9	31.7	14.1	3.35
4	Support activities still tend to focus on addressing immediate financial difficulties, while long-term academic, psychological, and capacity-building support is not adequately invested in and lacks dedicated staff.	3.1	14.5	30.4	34.8	17.2	3.48
5	There is a lack of mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of support activities over time, making it difficult to measure the actual impact on the learning process and the ability of disadvantaged students to maintain their studies.	4.0	16.3	34.0	29.1	16.6	3.38
6	Financial and human resources allocated to support activities are limited, especially in universities outside urban centers.	2.6	12.8	29.5	36.1	19.0	3.56
7	Communication and guidance for students to access support services are ineffective.	3.5	14.1	31.7	34.4	16.3	3.46

The survey results in Table 3 show that most indicators have an average score above 3.2, reflecting the survey participants' fairly clear awareness of the limitations in managing educational support activities. Notably, the limitation related to a lack of resources and dedicated staff has the highest average score ( $\bar{X}=3.56$ ), indicating that this is a major barrier to maintaining and expanding support programs. In a supplementary interview, a manager shared that many support activities can only be implemented when there are short-term projects or funding, leading to a situation where activities are carried out only when resources are available and stopped when resources run out.

In addition, limitations regarding a lack of overall strategy, inter-agency coordination, and ineffective communication were all rated quite highly, indicating that the problem lies not only in resources but also in management methods. One student stated that they only learned about academic support services when they encountered serious difficulties, whereas earlier information could have mitigated many risks of dropping out. Overall, these results show that the current management of educational support activities for disadvantaged students is still reactive rather than proactive, failing to form an integrated support system with a long-term development orientation. This is an important basis for discussing management implications and proposing solutions in the following sections of the study.

#### **4.4. Proposed policies**

##### **4.4.1. Establish a centralized coordination model for the student support system governance structure**

A fundamental requirement in building a framework for managing the student support system is to establish a unified governance structure based on a single coordinating point. Following this approach, higher education institutions should establish or strengthen a disadvantaged student support coordination board at the university level, or a student support and success center, directly headed by a vice-rector. This unit would play a central role in planning, coordinating, and monitoring policies and activities supporting students across the entire university.

In this governance model, a mandatory coordination mechanism between departments and functional units needs to be clearly and bindingly established. Participating entities include the student affairs office, the training department, specialized faculties, counseling centers, libraries, the information technology unit, student organizations, and the academic advising network. Connecting these entities within a unified coordination structure ensures the interconnectedness of support services and enhances collaborative responsibility throughout the entire university governance system.

The aforementioned centralized governance structure aims to overcome the fragmentation in student support implementation, where each unit only performs a separate function, easily leading to overlapping tasks or overlooking those in need of support. Therefore, it is necessary to standardize inter-unit coordination regulations through unified operational procedures, from receiving requests, screening applicants, referring services, providing support, to recording records and providing feedback. Each type of support needs to have a clearly defined lead unit, coordinating units, and specific processing deadlines, thereby limiting reactive, short-term, or situational support.

##### **4.4.2. Criteria for identifying and classifying disadvantaged students based on multidimensional approach**

To ensure accuracy and fairness in support allocation, the student support system management framework needs to be built on a set of criteria for identifying disadvantaged students based on a multidimensional and overlapping approach. This approach allows for a comprehensive identification of the various forms of social disadvantages that students may simultaneously encounter during their studies and integration into higher education. Accordingly, the criteria should not be limited to income alone, but should encompass different dimensions such as economic conditions, origin from remote areas, ethnic minorities, disability status, first-generation university students, limited cultural capital and higher education skills, lack of social support networks, as well as risks related to mental health and academic integration.

In parallel with the issuance of the criteria, higher education institutions need to establish a mechanism for periodic updating combined with a "self-verified declaration" mechanism. Under this mechanism, students are given the opportunity to proactively register for support using a standardized form, while the school conducts minimal verification based on information confidentiality and respect for student dignity. This approach helps to minimize the situation where students face genuine difficulties but do not have access to support due to procedural barriers or psychological reluctance to seek help.

##### **4.4.3. Design integrated support packages tailored to students' learning progress, instead of individual support forms**

Practical implementation shows that current student support activities tend to focus on financial assistance, while academic support is only at an average level and psychological support is limited. This necessitates a shift from individual support measures to designing integrated support packages that operate in

conjunction with the student's academic progress. In this direction, the support system needs to be structured on four pillars. First, the financial pillar aims to sustain studies through standardized scholarship policies, tuition waivers, emergency grants, and financial assistance for tuition fees. These forms of support need to be linked to a feasible study plan jointly developed by students and academic advisors, thereby shifting the focus from addressing difficulties in each semester to stabilizing the long-term academic path.

Second, the academic pillar aims to compensate for deficiencies in cultural capital and higher-level academic skills. The core activities include an academic start program for disadvantaged freshmen, a tutoring system for high-risk courses, shift-based academic advising, and peer learning models. This pillar directly addresses the structural academic barriers that disadvantaged students often face.

Third, the psychological and inclusion pillar aims to reduce feelings of inferiority and marginalization in the university environment. This requires the development of accessible, confidential, and flexible psychological counseling services, combined with adaptive capacity-building programs, community-building activities for first-generation students, and small-group mentoring models. This is a priority area as current support is insufficient to meet actual needs.

Fourth, the capacity and career development pillar aims to reduce long-term disadvantages for disadvantaged students. Policies should focus on integrating vocational skills modules into training programs, prioritizing internship and part-time employment opportunities within the school, and providing personalized career counseling services. The goal of this pillar is to expand the scope of support from maintaining academic achievement to ensuring fair competitiveness after graduation.

#### **4.4.4. Digitizing support management through unified profiles and early warning mechanisms**

Digitization is a crucial condition for improving the efficiency of student support system management. Accordingly, a common student support profile should be built for the entire school using a shift management model, integrating data related to academics, tuition fees, level of support service usage, class attendance status, course results, and counseling needs. Data exploitation must strictly adhere to security principles and only serve the purpose of support and quality management.

Based on that foundation, higher education institutions need to establish an early warning system for dropout risks based on indicators such as absenteeism rates, low midterm exam results, tuition debt, decreased academic engagement, or signs of psychological stress. When risk signals appear, the system automatically activates intervention processes and directs students to appropriate support services, thereby overcoming limitations in monitoring and evaluating support over time.

#### **4.4.5. Standardize the measurement, evaluation, and accountability of the support system**

To ensure sustainability and effectiveness, the student support system needs to be placed within a clear measurement and evaluation framework. Accordingly, higher education institutions need to issue a set of indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of support services at the institutional level, including the rate of access to services for disadvantaged students, the rate of academic retention and credit accumulation progress, the degree of disparity in academic results between student groups, the level of satisfaction and trust in support services, as well as the rate of suitable employment or internships after graduation for disadvantaged students. Evaluation activities should be conducted on a semester and annual basis, linked to continuous improvement. Each support program must have a clear intervention logic, specific measurable objectives, and periodic impact reports, thereby avoiding situations where support activities exist only formally or depend on short-term projects.

#### **4.4.6. Ensuring resources and developing a dedicated team according to competency standards**

The student support system management framework can only operate effectively when adequate resources and a dedicated team are ensured. Financially, a support budget needs to be designed using a combination of stable and flexible funding sources. Stable sources include regular budgets for system operation, while flexible sources come from emergency support funds, grants, alumni contributions, and businesses, but must be placed within a transparent and accountable governance framework.

Regarding personnel, competency standards need to be developed for the team involved in supporting students, including academic advisors, student services officers, and counseling specialists. Core competencies include social equity, counseling, case management, and service liaison. Simultaneously, faculty training is needed on risk identification and academic support for disadvantaged students to strengthen the role of the teaching staff in the support system.

#### **4.4.7. Improve communication and ensure access to services based on the principle of absolute non-discrimination; integrate equity into the school's development and quality assurance strategy**

An effective support system needs to be accompanied by a proactive and consistent communication strategy. Communication activities should closely follow the student's journey, from enrollment, mid-term, pre-course registration to before graduation, through multiple channels such as the learning management system, email, academic advisors, class activities, and the school's official communication channels. Simultaneously, communication messages need to be standardized according to the principles of non-discrimination and protecting the dignity of learners, emphasizing that access to support is a legitimate right of students. This approach contributes to reducing the fear of seeking support, which is a common barrier in practice.

Policies to support disadvantaged students need to be systematically integrated into the development strategy and internal quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions. Genuine equity should be identified as a governance objective in the school's strategy and annual plan, with specific targets for reducing disparities in academic performance between student groups. Integrating criteria for supporting disadvantaged students into the internal quality assurance system will help shift support from a marginal activity to a standard for evaluating the quality of education, thereby aligning with the requirements of university governance reform towards inclusiveness and sustainable development.

#### **4.5. Discussion**

The research results show that the relationship between social inequality and the effectiveness of educational support activities in higher education is twofold: it has the potential to mitigate immediate disadvantages while revealing clear limitations in intervening in structural inequality mechanisms. Survey and interview results reinforce Araki [2] argument that expanding access to higher education and increasing support programs do not automatically narrow inequality. In many cases, support activities mainly serve to "mitigate" direct consequences such as financial hardship or the risk of short-term dropout, rather than impacting the deep-seated differences in economic capital, culture, and academic skills. One administrator frankly admitted:

*"We help students get through each semester, but the current system fails to ensure they can truly compete on equal terms."* (CBQL02)

From the faculty's perspective, academic support programs are often insufficient to bridge the long-standing gap that students have accumulated before entering university. This is consistent with Goudeau *et al.* [6] analysis of the mismatch between academic background and socialization of working-class students. One faculty member shared:

*"Many disadvantaged students are very diligent, but they lack university study skills from the outset, and a few support sessions cannot bridge that gap."* (GV04)

Conversely, students clearly feel the immediate effects of support, even though they are aware of its limitations. One student stated:

*"Scholarships help me avoid dropping out, but the psychological pressure and feelings of inferiority remain."* (SV03)

These experiences suggest that current support activities mainly address the "symptoms" of inequality, consistent with Herbaut [30] observation that many interventions in higher education have limited effectiveness without a systemic and long-term approach.

Compared to international models, research results show that higher education systems that prioritize equity often go beyond individual support packages, building an integrated support ecosystem closely linked to academic management and student life. Research in Australia [13], [31] indicates that student support programs are most effective when designed as a continuous chain, from financial aid and academic support to individual mentoring and community engagement. Similarly, analysis of Nordic countries by Helland *et al.* [3] shows that reducing dropout rates relies not only on grants but also on systems for monitoring academic progress and early intervention. These experiences suggest that support for disadvantaged students needs to be "institutionalized" within higher education management, rather than operating as situational supplementary programs.

However, international models also warn of the risk of reproducing inequality within equity policies. Previous studies [7], [32] demonstrate that some preferential policies, if not properly monitored, can inadvertently reinforce the advantages of groups already possessing higher social capital. This is particularly

noteworthy in the context of Vietnam, where disparities between educational institutions and between student groups within the same school are significant. One administrator shared:

*“Policies exist, but stronger schools perform better than weaker ones, so the gap becomes even more apparent.”* (CBQL04)

This observation shows that international lessons cannot be mechanically copied, but need to be adapted to the actual management conditions and resources.

From the analysis, the important implication for higher education management is the need to shift from a fragmented support approach to a system-based management of student support. This requires support activities not only to be handled by a single department but to be integrated into the school’s development strategy, from student recruitment and curriculum design to learning outcome assessment. One administrator emphasized:

*“If supporting disadvantaged students is considered a side issue, the effectiveness will only be at the level of emergency relief.”* (CBQL01)

This view aligns with Fitzgerald *et al.* [19] argument that equity management in higher education requires a framework that coordinates policy, organization, and pedagogical practice.

Furthermore, the integration of social equity into the school’s development strategy should be understood broadly, encompassing changes in organizational culture and faculty perceptions. Several previous studies [33]–[35] showed that faculty beliefs and expectations can significantly influence the learning outcomes of students in different groups. One lecturer shared:

*“We need training to better understand disadvantaged students, not just being assigned additional support tasks.”* (GV02)

From the students’ perspective, their greatest desire is not just material support, but a feeling of being acknowledged and treated fairly. One student expressed:

*“What I need is for the school to consider my circumstances as part of the training design, not an exception.”* (SV06)

The results show that current educational support activities play an important role in reducing the risk of dropping out and immediate disadvantages, but are not enough to fundamentally change the structures of social inequality in higher education. This confirms Ugglå and Soneryd [36] assertion that higher education for sustainable development must place social equity at the center of management and policy planning. Only when support activities are organized as a system linked to the school’s long-term strategy can higher education truly play a role in narrowing, rather than merely mitigating, existing social inequalities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study aims to clarify the relationship between social inequality and support activities for disadvantaged students in Vietnamese higher education from an educational management perspective. Based on a survey of 227 participants, semi-structured interviews with 16 subjects, and analysis of policy documents, the study shows that inequality in higher education is not limited to economic factors but also manifests in a lack of cultural capital, academic skills, access to technology, social support networks, and exclusionary psychological experiences. The results directly answer the first research question by identifying that the forms of inequality affecting disadvantaged students are multifaceted and overlapping, with financial hardship having a prominent but inseparable influence on other structural factors. Simultaneously, the study also answers the second question by pointing out that current support activities mainly focus on financial support, while academic, psychological, and long-term capacity building support have not been systematically designed and integrated into the overall governance strategy of the university.

From these findings, the study shows that without placing support activities within an integrated governance framework, they are unlikely to intervene in the mechanisms of unequal reproduction in higher education. This reinforces the argument that higher education can be both a driver of social mobility and a mechanism for unequal reproduction, depending on how equitable governance is implemented. Theoretically, the study contributes to shifting the approach from fragmented support measures to an “integrated support ecosystem” model, connecting social reproduction theory, educational equity theory, and

a systems approach in university governance. From a practical perspective, the results provide a scientific basis for building a management model to support disadvantaged students, focusing on centralized coordination, standardized identification criteria, integrated multi-pillar support, and the establishment of a long-term monitoring mechanism.

However, the study has some limitations that need to be clearly recognized: firstly, the survey sample is limited to 10 higher education institutions, thus not fully reflecting the diversity among different types of schools and regions. Secondly, the research design is cross-sectional; it does not assess the long-term impact of the support models. Thirdly, the data is mainly based on the perceptions and evaluations of stakeholders, and does not directly measure changes in academic performance and the ability to maintain learning over time. Therefore, further research needs to expand the scale and scope of comparison, conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effectiveness of integrated support models, and incorporate administrative data and real-world learning indicators to enhance reliability. In summary, the study confirms that support for disadvantaged students is only truly meaningful when placed within a higher education governance strategy that prioritizes genuine equity.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to sincerely thank the interviewees and respondents for agreeing to respond and providing objective assessments.

### FUNDING INFORMATION

This research is funded by Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) under a project within the framework of the program titled “Strengthening the capacity for education and basic scientific research integrated with strategic technologies at VNU-HCM, aiming to achieve advanced standards comparable to regional and global levels during the 2025-2030 period, with a vision toward 2045”.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riting - **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**riting - **R**eview & **E**ding

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

### INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was attained from all respondents before data collection.

### ETHICAL APPROVAL

The researchers followed institutional policies and the ethical review committee of the Institution of Education approved it.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from Ministry of Education and Training, Circular No. 01/VBHN-BGDĐT, April 13, 2021, promulgating preschool education program. Hanoi, Vietnam, 2021, <https://moet.gov.vn/van-ban/vanban/Pages/chi-tiet-van-ban.aspx?ItemID=1400>.




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