Further Insight into Social Factors Affecting Access to and Equity for Low-SES Students in Higher Education: Experiences of Alumni in Indonesia

Mega Wanti[1], Renate Wesselink, Harm Biemans, Perry den Brok

Abstract

PURPOSE. This study goes beyond traditional research focusing on enrollment figures, financial aid, and student academic performance, aiming to explore how social factors influence access to and equity in higher education (HE) for students with low socio-economic status (SES) in Indonesia.

METHODS. Employing qualitative methods such as interviews and the snowball technique, this study delves into the firsthand experiences of six alumni who received financial assistance at a prominent university in Indonesia.

FINDINGS. This study delves into the dynamics of social support in HE access and equity, focusing on Indonesia, a developing country. While acknowledging the recognized importance of social support in HE, particularly in developed countries, this research uniquely examines the types and impacts of support from family, peers, teachers, and lecturers, as perceived by individual alumni. By concentrating on Indonesia, the study offers valuable insights into the role of social support in a developing country, bridging a gap in existing literature and shedding light on the nuanced nature of support in the HE journey, with implications for enhancing access and equity in similar contexts.
The findings underscore the critical role of various actors, including family, teachers, lecturers, peers, secondary-school administrative staff, university student associations, and local government, in providing emotional, instrumental, and informational support to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Notably, family support can be both encouraging and challenging, depending on factors such as awareness of the importance of HE and financial limitations. Additionally, the study highlights the significance of support in facilitating successful transitions from secondary school to university, ultimately contributing to the completion of university degrees.

CONCLUSION. This study provides a comprehensive examination of the dynamics of social support in HE access and equity, particularly within the context of Indonesia. By focusing on the perceptions of individual alumni, the research uncovers the pivotal roles played by various actors, including family, teachers, peers, and institutional entities like secondary-school administrative staff, university student associations, and local government. These findings not only emphasize the importance of social support in facilitating successful transitions and academic outcomes but also shed light on the nuanced nature of support within the HE journey. Importantly, the study highlights the potential for targeted interventions to enhance access and equity for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, ultimately contributing to their academic success and broader societal advancement.

Keywords: social factors, access, equity, low-SES students, higher education

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[1] Corresponding author: m.wanti85@gmail.com

Points of Interest:

The key findings and contributions related to social factors affecting low socio-economic status (LSES) students' journey through HE in Indonesia:

- Study Objective and Focus: This research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how social factors influence access to and fairness in HE for LSES students, with a particular focus on *Bidikmisi* alumni, within the context of Indonesia.
- Varied Support Sources: Emotional and instrumental support emerge as crucial factors across all findings, with family playing a significant role in the pre-university lives of respondents, despite offering both positive and negative forms of support.
- Confirmed and Expanded Factors: The study affirms the roles of familiar actors such as family, teachers, lecturers, peers, and local government in ensuring equitable access to HE. Additionally, it introduces new contributors including secondary-school administrative staff, university student organizations, and local governments.
- Support Dynamics at Different Levels: Teachers provide vital emotional, informational, and instrumental support during secondary school, while peers, RSAs, and lecturers play instrumental and emotional roles during university. The support network shifts from family to peers, university staff, and RSAs during university years.

INTRODUCTION

Access to and equity in higher education (HE) represent critical dimensions that resonate globally, shaping societal development and individual trajectories (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Paletta & Bonoli, 2019). The imperative to extend educational opportunities has been enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goal 4, mandating universal access to affordable, quality HE by 2030 (United Nations, 2020). Disparities persist, notably between developed and developing nations, with the gross enrolment ratio (GER) reflecting these gaps (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). Factors such as poverty, gender inequality, and infrastructural limitations continue to impede access, exemplified by Indonesia's context (Kemdikbud, 2020; UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, 2019).

Studying access and equity in HE is crucial, as these concepts are dedicated to fostering an inclusive academic environment. The importance lies in creating equal opportunities for individuals, irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds, to enter and succeed in HE. According to Neubauer and Tanaka (2011), access is conceptualized as the extent to which educational facilities and opportunities are available to those in need. Equity in education, as defined by the OECD (2018), pertains to ensuring equal learning opportunities for all students, emphasizing the fairness of the learning process. In the context of this study, access ensures that a diverse range of students can actively participate in HE. Furthermore, equity guarantees fair chances and treatment for all students throughout their university journey.

Understanding the nuances of access and equity in HE is importance for international readers. Developed nations exhibit successful models, characterized by comprehensive support mechanisms, including government-backed initiatives and scholarships (DAAD, 2024; Danish Ministry of Education, 2019). Conversely, developing countries grapple with persistent challenges, necessitating innovative strategies, as exemplified by initiatives in Bangladesh and Rwanda (Kirenga, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019). The *Bidikmisi* program in Indonesia serves as a noteworthy case study, embodying the nation's commitment to overcoming access barriers and fostering equity (Wasahua et al., 2018).

This study focuses on the Bidikmisi program, an Indonesian initiative launched in 2010 and expanded subsequently, aiming to break socio-economic barriers and enhance HE access. It provides tuition-fee subsidies to economically disadvantaged yet academically proficient students, embodying a holistic strategy for inclusive education (Wasahua et al., 2018). As a flagship policy of the Indonesian government, Bidikmisi mandates HE institutions, acting as organizers, to offer living-expense assistance

and tuition-fee exemptions to recipients at the start of their academic journey. Other services, like accommodation and subsidies for books and learning tools, are optional and contingent on institutional considerations. Bidikmisi students demonstrate remarkable academic ability, with over 87% maintaining a GPA above 3.0 (on a 1-4 scale), contributing significantly to the overall educational quality. Tracer studies show diverse career paths for Bidikmisi graduates, ranging from involvement in teacher education, civil service roles, entrepreneurship, to pursuing post-graduate studies (Panduan Bidikmisi, 2018). This program is recognized for promoting effective socio-economic mobility and fostering academic excellence in HE.

This study focuses on Bidikmisi alumni, addressing a crucial gap in the literature on the success of low socioeconomic status (LSES) students in HE. While previous research often focuses on alumni contributions to university marketing and career patterns, this study uniquely explores factors perceived by alumni as vital for LSES student success. By investigating alumni experiences during the transition from secondary school to university and throughout the HE journey, the study aims to uncover insights into the role of social factors in accessing and achieving equity in HE. Understanding the interaction of these factors is key to informing targeted support programs for LSES students, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable HE environment.

Study Objective

This study aims to explore social support dynamics in HE access and equity within Indonesia, a developing country. While social support's significance in HE is acknowledged, research has predominantly focused on developed nations (Wanti et al., 2022). This study examines support types and impacts from influential actors like family, peers, teachers, and lecturers, with a focus on alumni perceptions. By focusing on Indonesia, it provides unique insights distinct from developed contexts, bridging literature gaps and offering implications for improving access and equity in developing countries.

Research Questions

The present study has two research questions: (a) Which social factors are evident in access and equity for students of low socioeconomic status (Bidikmisi alumni) within the Indonesian university context? (b) What experiences do these successful Bidikmisi alumni reveal about the role of social factors? The research questions are divided into two phases:

1. Pre-university life
    a. Please elaborate on your experiences in pre-university life.
    b. Who was involved in this period, and to what extent did they play a role?
    c. What other factors do you think might have influenced your pre-university life, and how?

2. During university life
    a. Please elaborate on your experiences during your university life.
    b. Who was involved in this period, and to what extent did they play a role?
    c. What other factors might have influenced your university life, and how?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Higher education pathways are promoted as a means to broaden participation in Australia, thereby fundamentally altering the demographic composition to ensure traditionally underrepresented groups, such as LSES students, have equal opportunities within the sector (Griffin, 2014; Lovat & Darmawan, 2019; Wheelahan, 2009). Previous research and empirical studies in HE have emphasized socioeconomic disparities impacting student experiences, encompassing university readiness,

employment during studies, and academic performance (Aronson, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Merritt, 2008; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Tym et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003).

The concept of cultural and social capital emphasizes how wealthier families facilitate HE and professional entry (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012). This support, which includes access to networks, resources, and opportunities, creates disparities for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012). Research consistently shows that students with LSES face fewer opportunities for success in university settings compared to their high-SES counterparts (Jury et al., 2017).

In Indonesia, economic constraints hinder LSES students, affecting their ability to cover tuition fees, acquire educational materials, and meet living expenses associated with pursuing HE (World Bank, 2014). Disparities in educational preparedness and access to quality pre-university education exacerbate these challenges for LSES students (World Bank, 2014). Despite efforts to enhance accessibility to HE, enrolment of LSES students remains limited, with leading public universities predominantly admitting students from the wealthiest segments of the population (Fadhil & Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021).

In the context of HE, regardless of race, gender, or background, having support from friends and family is critical for everyone during the transition from high school to college (Evans et al., 2009). This transition can cause stress (Carter-Francique et al., 2015), for example due to changes in the learning system at university, and a new circle of friends. Therefore, having a supportive network can greatly help individuals overcome the challenges and stress associated with these changes (Carter-Francique et al., 2015).

Resilient LSES adolescents achieving higher academic success often attribute their progress to support from parents, peers, and teachers, along with closer school ties, heightened academic expectations, and increased self-efficacy (Esen-Aktay, 2010). Social support significantly shapes their HE journey. This study employs social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) to explore social factors' role in HE access and equity. Social capital encompasses interactions, networks, and relationship patterns, as well as the process of social interaction within individuals or groups (e.g., local associations, communities; Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Black & Hughes, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Here, social capital refers to a network within close environments that fosters interactions to achieve specific goals, such as ensuring access to and equity in HE for LSES students.

Understanding how social networks offer support for HE access and equity is crucial for LSES students. Rodriguez and Cohen (1998) identify three social support functions: instrumental, informational, and emotional, which have been utilized in recent research (Hernandez et al., 2021; Lloyd-Jones, 2021; Saefudin et al., 2021; Vekkaila et al., 2018). This study adopts Rodriguez and Cohen's framework to analyse social factors' role in supporting HE access and equity for LSES students, providing insight into their role in Indonesia's LSES Bidikmisi recipients.

Informational Support

Having access to information about study materials, exam preparation, and coping with academic challenges significantly impacts success (Mishra, 2020). Studies have shown that students with strong information-related social capital tend to perform better academically (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2006). Given the resource constraints faced by LSES students, informational support is crucial for a smooth transition from secondary school to university. Further research is required to comprehensively explore the role of informational support in enhancing access and equity in HE.

Emotional Support

Social interactions and relationships that offer assistance or foster a sense of care and attachment can greatly contribute to HE success (Hobfoll & Stokes, 1988). Putnam (2000) notes that underrepresented students often gain emotional support from peers with similar backgrounds, sharing experiences related to discrimination and stereotypes, which can create a support network. Studies (e.g., Mishra, 2020) suggest that emotional support from network members can positively influence academic outcomes.

Investigating which actors provide emotional support and how it affects LSES students in terms of HE access and equity warrants further exploration.

Instrumental Support

For LSES students, such as working-class or first-generation college attendees, navigating HE can be daunting due to limited instrumental knowledge. These students may lack awareness about networking's importance in establishing relationships and accessing resources (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Lloyd-Jones (2021) emphasizes that instrumental support, including financial assistance, is pivotal for students' academic success. In this context, financial assistance might cover expenses like transportation, registration fees, and other costs associated with university learning. Despite its significance, detailed insights into instrumental support for LSES students remain scarce and require further investigation.

Previous research in HE underscores socioeconomic disparities affecting student experiences, including university readiness, in-study employment, and academic performance (Aronson, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Merritt, 2008; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Tym et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003). Affluent, educated parents often provide cultural and social capital facilitating their children's transition to HE and the workforce (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012), while some families lack this support (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012). In Indonesia, LSES students encounter barriers to HE access (World Bank, 2014), facing greater challenges within university environments compared to their high-SES peers (Jury et al., 2017). Recognizing the crucial role of social support in the HE transition, this study addresses gaps in current literature. Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) guides exploration of social factors in HE access and equity, offering insight into the dynamics shaping access and equity for LSES students (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Black & Hughes, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

METHOD

The methodology incorporates detailed explanations of ontology and epistemology, adopting a social constructivist perspective that acknowledges reality's social construction through interactions and interpretations. Following Berger and Luckmann (1966), it emphasizes the socially constructed nature of reality. Epistemologically, it aligns with interpretive or constructivist viewpoints, prioritizing subjective knowledge creation over universal truths, influenced by Bevir and Blakely (2018), and Lincoln and Guba (2016). Qualitative methods are advocated to explore nuanced individual perspectives, emphasizing the context-dependent nature of human understanding in the realm of access and equity in HE. This qualitative comparative case study concerns alumni of one large public university in the Java Islands in Indonesia (hereinafter, "the university").

Participants

Data collection involved in-depth interviews with Bidikmisi alumni to capture their experiences and perspectives. University staff managing the Bidikmisi program aided in identifying potential respondents. Eligibility criteria required respondents to have completed their university studies, aligning with Bidikmisi's goal of supporting economically challenged students through graduation.

Twenty-one potential respondents were identified and contacted through WhatsApp. Upon their agreement, interviews were scheduled and conducted via WhatsApp calls, later transcribed and summarized. Two participants were excluded due to incomplete participation or scholarship discontinuation. Nineteen interviews advanced to the next phase of analysis.

We carefully reviewed the responses provided by the participants in relation to our two research questions: the social factors at play and the types of support offered to aid the participants' academic journey. After thorough evaluation, we found that thirteen participants did not provide complete responses to both of these main research questions. Therefore, our analysis focused on the data provided by the six alumni who furnished comprehensive answers for this study.

Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the (anonymous) handling of the data before they were asked to agree with participation (informed consent). They could withdraw at any moment during the study and their participation was voluntary. During data analysis, identities of the respondents were made fictitious, such that the researchers involved were unfamiliar with the true identities of the respondents. The setup of the study, its data collection and analysis and reporting were done in accordance with the research guidelines of Wageningen University as well as the Netherlands national guidelines (Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, 2018). When the study was conducted, the university was still in the transition process of setting up a research ethics committee, making it impossible for the research team to ask ethical approval in advance.

Interviews

The semi-structured interview framework was developed based on a previous study by Wanti et al (2023) examining the impact of social factors on HE access and equity. In the process of creating an overview of social factors related to HE access and equity, several steps were undertaken. First, general questions about experiences before and after entering university were crafted. Second, these questions were tested with two Bidikmisi alumni in a pilot phase, which was not part of the main study. Third, during the pilot interviews, emerging roles or actors were noted and their support in the educational journey was explored. Fourth, the pilot interview findings were summarized, and confirmation was sought from respondents. Fifth, information on additional contributors and their roles was gathered. Sixth, feedback on question clarity and potential improvements was sought. Finally, the interview structure was finalized, the timeframe was adjusted, and illustrative examples for each factor were provided.

Our rationale for selecting transcripts for data analysis was deeply embedded in our commitment to a social constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978). This approach is grounded in the belief that to comprehensively contextualize social factors, the full context provided in transcripts must be captured (Vygotsky, 1978). For instance, when a participant's response was concise, such as a simple agreement that teachers played a crucial role in their transition from secondary school to HE, without offering additional insights into the nature of this support, we purposefully excluded such participants from our analysis. This stringent criterion ensured that the selected transcripts offered comprehensive insights into the myriad ways social factors influenced the experiences of alumni.

In anticipation of surprising results, we employed a thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2017), using an open coding system. Thematic analysis, a popular choice among qualitative researchers (Selvam & Collicutt, 2012), was chosen for its alignment with our study's goal of identifying patterns and meanings in the data. This approach goes beyond summarization, aiming to unearth key aspects relevant to our research question. To ensure a thorough and high-quality analysis, we followed the method's built-in steps, including a two-stage review process. Initially, our analysis focused on predefined social factors outlined in our prior research, encompassing the roles of family, peers, teachers, and lecturers. However, our study's uniqueness emerged as we expanded our understanding through individual respondent insights, identifying additional contributing factors beyond those initially identified in the thematic analysis. This expansion enriched our study compared to previous research, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of social factors influencing access and equity in HE.

The interviews were conducted according to mutually agreed-upon schedules with the participants, and a majority of them opted for sessions post their regular working hours. The duration of the interviews varied from 30 to 60 minutes, and was conducted in the Bahasa Indonesia language. Following the interviews, transcription was carried out in Bahasa Indonesia, and subsequently, translation into English was carried out.

Analysis

We employed a series of analytical steps to identify social factors influencing HE access and equity. Drawing from a prior review (Wanti et al., 2022), we initially identified family, peers, teachers, and

lecturers as key social factors. In this study, we expanded our understanding through individual respondents, identifying other contributing actors from interview insights.

Firstly, responses were categorized according to relevant social factors during both pre-university and university phases. Secondly, any mentions of additional factors within the data were identified. Thirdly, a thorough review of interview transcripts was conducted to elucidate the roles and functions of these factors in facilitating access and equity. Lastly, selected data was allocated to specific social support categories—emotional, instrumental, or informational.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the validity and accuracy of our study, we implemented several measures. Following the interviews, we provided participants with a summary of findings for their review, ensuring the accuracy of their perspectives. Additionally, both the main researcher and an assistant meticulously examined the recordings, transcripts, and summaries to maintain consistency and accuracy in our analyses. Furthermore, our findings were categorized into three sections: respondent background, pre-university experiences, and university life, facilitating a comprehensive and detailed narrative. To protect participants privacy, we anonymized specific details such as names and places, while preserving the integrity of the data.

In terms of ethical approval, we did not obtain it for this study because the research adhered to ethical principles such as respect for individuals' rights and autonomy, as well as ensuring the integrity and validity of the research findings. We incorporated information on informed consent. Additionally, the participation of respondents was always voluntary, and data were handled anonymously during analyses and publication.

RESULTS

This section is structured into four parts. The initial segment offers an overview of the six alumni respondents, aiming to discern differences and similarities in factors and social support affecting HE access and equity. Brief findings for each respondent are outlined in Table 1. Following this, the subsequent part delivers a concise profile of each respondent, enriched with quotes, enhancing our grasp of factor dynamics. Each profile concludes with an analysis of how factors contributed to access and equity. Lastly, to highlight prominent factors and types of social support (informational, emotional, instrumental) for access and equity, Table 2 summarizes corresponding factors and support types.

In this results section, we present findings (Table 1) from the analysed data, offering insights into predetermined categories of the social factors (family, high school staff, university staff, teachers, lecturers, peers, local government, alumni, Regional Student Association) and forms of social support (emotional, informational, instrumental) that contribute to access and equity for each respondent.

This study used the Cumulative Achievement Index (Index Prestasi Kumulatif or IPK) in Indonesia. The student grade from 1 to 4 scale. If a student gets a 4, it means they did really well, and if they get a 1, it means they didn't do so great. The government has set three levels for graduating from university: satisfactory (which is between 2.76 and 3.00), very satisfactory (between 3.01 and 3.50), and with honours (above 3.50; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). In the following section, we present the data for each respondent, organized into three main categories: background information, pre-university experiences, and university experiences.

Pre-university

Before university, family members (including parents, older siblings, and grandparents) had a mixed impact, with positive guidance from older siblings and occasional parental financial concerns. In secondary school, teachers offered emotional, informational, and practical help, while peers had minimal influence. Free facilities from the local government supported access.

University

At university, lecturers aided with thesis supervision, emotional support, and practical assistance. Peers continued providing emotional and informational aid. University staff, especially from the Bidikmisi program, offered help, and government-provided student dorms promoted equity. Regional student associations played a significant role at the start of university. Individual experiences in both phases will be explored further.

Table 1

Overview of Factors and Forms of Social Support Contributing to Access and Equity for Each Respondent

	Access: Pre-university		Equity: University	
Name	Factor	Type of social support	Factor	Type of social support
Nani	Family: Mother	Emotional (+) Instrumental (+)	RSA Lecturers: thesis supervisor	Emotional (+) Instrumental (+) Emotional (+)
Yana	Family Teachers Secondary alumni	Emotional (-) Instrumental (+) Informational (+)	RSA University: Bidikmisi staff	Instrumental (+) Instrumental (+)
Ida	Family Teachers	Instrumental (-) Informational (+)	Peer	Informational (+) Instrumental (+)
Susanti	Family	Emotional (+)	RSA	Emotional (+) Informational (+)
	Family: (older) sister	Informational (+)	Lecturer: thesis supervisor	Emotional (+)
	Teachers	Emotional (+) Instrumental (+) Informational (+)		
	Local government	Instrumental (+)		
Wira	Family Administrative staff (Scout coach)	Emotional (-) Informational (+) Emotional (+)	Peer: inner circle	Informational (+)
Sonya	Family: parents and grandparents	Instrumental (+) Emotional (+)	RSA Local government	Emotional (+) Instrumental (+)

Note. The names presented in this study are fictitious. RSA refers to Regional Student Association (in Indonesian, *organisasi mahasiswa daerah* - OMDA). (+) & (–) symbols refer to the negative or positive effects of social actors, according to the participants.

Alumni Stories

1. Nani

Background: In 2015, Nani graduated from university with a remarkable 3.88 GPA. Raised by her single mother, a secondary school teacher, and alongside her older sister, Nani's family faced financial challenges common among teachers in Indonesia. Currently working at a sugar and agro-industrial

company, Nani's family, like others in the study, experiences financial constraints due to the generally low income of teachers, impacting their ability to afford university fees for Nani and her sister.

Pre-university life: During her secondary school years, Nani faced uncertainties about pursuing university education due to unclear family finances. When Nani considered postponing her studies, her mother strongly encouraged her to continue her HE journey.

> My mom told me that the money to study at the university was not my business, and I don't need to think about it.

University life: During her first year at the university, Nani did not perceive any significant difficulties. She maintained a GPA of 3.9 for two semesters and received support from the RSA (e.g., information on adapting to a new environment).

> I think the RSA plays an important role. Like those who give directions on which restaurants are cheap, delicious, and suit our tastes. In addition, when students are homesick, the RSA embraces and accompanies them. They are very helpful.

Nani's lecturers, and especially her thesis supervisor, played a crucial role for in her fourth year. She even regarded her supervisor as a parent (father figure).

> He (thesis supervisor) told me that, if I needed money for my thesis, we could work together. This shows that he embraces—he cares for students under his guidance.

Nani's journey reveals key supporters for access and equity: her mother (secondary school to university), the RSA (university start), and her thesis supervisor (university end). Their support was both emotional and instrumental. Nani's mother's emotional backing instilled confidence in pursuing HE. The RSA facilitated her transition to university. The thesis supervisor's dual support reduced thesis expenses and motivated timely graduation.

2. Yana

Background: The son of a farmer and a homemaker, Yana came from a small city in Sumatra. Since childhood, Yana had dreamed of studying on Java Island (the most developed island in Indonesia). Currently employed as a forestry consultant, he started a Master's degree in 2021.

Pre-university life: Yana's interest in HE began with a socialization program offered by one of the universities in West Java.

> There was a university-socialization program entitled "The university goes to school." University students who were attending classes—who were studying at the university—they went to schools to socialize kids about what university was like, and I started to see it as a good opportunity for me.

Yana's family initially opposed his desire to study on Java Island, as it was far from home. When Yana had difficulty with registration expenses, he received support from his teacher.

> And I remember very well that there was a registration fee about 200,000 rupiah (€12.5). I was in secondary school, and I didn't have any money, so I told my parents, and they forbid it. So actually, from the beginning, my parents didn't support me to study far away.

Yana's intention to attend university in Java did not stop with his parents' prohibition. He worked hard to come up with the registration fee. He was accepted to the university by invitation (entrance selection based on academic report).

> But because I was desperate, I looked for odd jobs, guarding the shop. In the village, there are clove plantations, so if you climb and get the cloves, the owner will give you money. I kept the money, so I could pay the registration fee.

Yana further explained the role of his teacher.

> Before leaving for university, I visited her home, and she helped me by giving me money. I remember at that time it was 100,000 rupiahs (€6.25 euro). In the past, 100,000 rupiah was quite substantial. I was quite close to this teacher, because she both explained the courses and always gave me motivation.

University life: At the beginning of his university life, Yana received support from the RSA, which helped with accommodations.

> Fortunately, there was the RSA. A senior was very helpful when he first entered the university. We didn't have to bother looking for student housing; we just stayed at our senior's RSA boarding home.

Yana also received support from Bidikmisi staff in the university student office by involving Yana in its activities committee.

> For example, there were activities for trainees and we—Bidikmisi students—were involved in committees, each with a different salary. That was quite helpful.

Yana's experience underscores that family isn't always a supportive factor for HE. Instead, his teacher offered instrumental and emotional support. Secondary-school peers provided vital HE information, while the RSA extended instrumental aid at the start of university. The Bidikmisi team facilitated extra financial help through university event jobs.

3. Ida

Background: Ida's father was a civil servant (village apparatus), and her mother was a homemaker. Currently employed as a teacher, Ida obtained a Master's degree (on scholarship) in 2020.
Pre-university life: The first challenge Ida faced in pursuing HE occurred when her parents did not allow her to continue her studies at the best secondary school in town due to its cost and location.

> At that time, I had passed using the academic report at the best secondary school (name SMA 1), but because my parents were worried that SMA 1 would require a lot of money, and the location was far away. Even when my teacher tried to persuade my parents, they didn't allow it.

The secondary-school guidance counselor's role in the transition between secondary school and university involved supporting Ida in the registration process for the Bidikmisi program.

> I didn't listen to my parents when I registered for Bidikmisi, and this was helped by the guidance counselor, so I think the secondary-school guidance counselor played a very important role. In my opinion, the relationship between students and the guidance counselor is also important. So, I was given money to print the documents, and to go to the internet café, because I don't have a laptop.

University life: At the university, Ida felt she needed to put more effort into studying, because she felt that other students had come from the best secondary schools, which had the best study facilities. She, therefore, needed to make more effort to compete with other students.

> So, I added extra time to study. So, I tried to be more diligent than my friends who lived in that city. That's what I could do. I tried to be more diligent. Thank God, my GPA was 3.79 in the first year. My highest GPA was 3.89, and my last GPA was 3.67. Thank God, I could graduate cum laude.

Ida also perceived that her friends had played an important role in the learning process at university, mostly when learning together, but also with financial support.

> With friends in the department, the focus was more on learning together and preparing for competitions. We studied together in the boarding house, and there were books or journals that we reviewed. Or we divided the lesson—I learn this part, you learn that part, then we'll share and explain them to each other. Then we had friends we could rely on for financial support. When one person lacked money, someone who still had money would lend it. So, the friendships differed; some were for learning. From friends in the organization, we learned public speaking and how to socialize with each other.

Ida received instrumental support from her teacher in secondary school. Peers played an important role in providing informational and instrumental support throughout her university life.

4. Susanti

Background: Susanti's father was a bus driver, and her mother was a street vendor. Susanti currently works as an assistant manager at a food and beverage company.

Pre-university life: Susanti had displayed brilliant achievements since primary school. This led to her acceptance to a secondary boarding school provided by the local government in Indonesia. A teacher in the secondary school encouraged her and other students to pursue HE through the Bidikmisi route.

> When I was in secondary school, I attended a boarding school. The local government took the initiative to establish a boarding school and provide full scholarships to students. I come from a poor family and, indeed, from the start, I received a scholarship for three years in secondary school. Because this school is free— completely free—all school fees, living costs, and housing costs were covered by the local government at that time.
> When I was in the third year of secondary school, our teachers really encouraged their students to continue studying and get another scholarship, because they had already received scholarships for secondary school. I received a lot of help from my teachers and was assisted in enrolling in public HE through the Bidikmisi route.

Susanti distinguished two forms of support that helped her to continue her studies at university: motivation and technical support.

> If it's possible to separate the roles into two, one role provides rich motivation, mental support, and enthusiasm to continue studying at a higher level, and the other consists of technical support. In terms of motivation, I received support from parents and family. From the start, my parents told me that my father would not be able to give me anything from an economic perspective. The only thing that parents could give was to help in terms of education. So that was the main motivation for my

brothers and sisters. In terms of technical support, the most important people were my teachers in secondary school, who helped a lot with the Bidikmisi registration. Another one might be my sister, who was more experienced than my parents, who didn't really understand where to go to university or what major to choose.

University life: Peers and RSAs played an important part in Susanti's university life.

So, I spent most of my time with friends and, at the beginning of my studies, there were student organizations from my hometown. Well, at that time, a university student from my secondary school came to visit me. The RSA taught me how to live outside my hometown, because it was my first time in Y city. After that, I met friends who were in the same department. We struggled together, studied together, and did assignments together.

During her second year, Susanti met an instructor who guided her throughout her university studies.

When I was in the second year, I met a nutrition instructor. At that time, he was teaching one course. It was fun, and it encouraged me to be active in the organization and in competitions. So, I often asked this instructor to be a mentor in every competition, until the very end.

Susanti's story showcases different sources of support in her education. Her family gave emotional and informational help, her lecturer offered emotional and instrumental aid, and the local government provided instrumental support with a free secondary boarding school. At the university level, the RSA offered emotional and informational assistance during the transition, and emotional support from her thesis supervisor was also significant.

5. Wira

Background: The son of a farmer and a homemaker, Wira is currently employed at a coal company. Pre-university life: Wira initially hesitated to pursue university education but was introduced to Bidikmisi and encouraged by a Scout coach from his school's administrative staff. Despite this, his plans were challenged by his parents' especially his mother's apprehensions.

After my parents and my coach discussed the Bidikmisi program, my mother finally started to open up, and she said, "Yes," and asked me to try it first. Then I tried, in the name of God, and thanks to God, I passed. Because of Bidikmisi, with all kinds of expenses, tuition is free, everything is covered.

University life: At the beginning of his university studies, Wira had trouble following academic life, but then he got a friend to study with him.

In the past, it was a bit difficult to adjust to the education phase at the university in the first year. At that time, the solution was to have friends in class to study together.

His thesis supervisor played a crucial role in supporting Wira's efforts to complete his university studies.

The relevant factor refers to my supervisor, who is very good—super good. He was the one looking for a research site. He facilitated all research expenses for students under his guidance. A group of all students under his guidance and senior alumni was created to guide the students during the research process. Basically, I didn't spend a dime for my research.

At first, Wira did not receive support from his family. He did receive support from staff at his secondary school, however, who approached his parents to inform them about Bidikmisi. Peers and the thesis supervisor provided important informational and instrumental support during Wira's university life.

6. Sonya

Background: Sonya lived with and received educational support from her grandparents, who lived in a small village in Java. Her parents worked in Jakarta (the capital city), and her mother worked as a TKW (*tenaga kerja wanita*, or a woman working abroad, usually as a housekeeper). Sonya is currently employed as a production manager in a honey company.

Pre-university life: Sonya was hindered from pursuing HE by her grandparents and aunts, as well as because of limited funds. Her parents nevertheless supported Sonya's desire to pursue HE.

> From childhood, I was closer to my grandparents, because my parents worked in Jakarta, and my school fees were paid by my grandparents. When I wanted to continue to university, my grandfather told me that, if I wanted to continue my studies, he did not think he could afford it. But my parents continued to support me. I had to try it first, because there might be information about scholarships.

University life: During her university life, Sonya felt that the greatest support came from her friends from her hometown. She also saw the student dormitory provided by the local government of her hometown as an important source of support. In addition, the thesis supervisor provided instrumental support in the final year.

> We were in the university dormitory during our first year. My friends from the same hometown helped a lot. Even though they were in different majors, the lessons were still the same. If I didn't have money, I could borrow from them. In the fourth year, there is a research fee. For me, it was quite expensive, and my parents could not always send the money, so I initially borrowed the money from my friends.
> In the second year, I lived in the dormitory provided by my hometown local government. All students from my hometown could stay there for free. When writing the thesis, my supervisor helped with the cost of the analysis. For example, when he asked me to do the acid amino analysis, he would pay for the costs.

Sonya's experience points to several family actors (e.g., grandparents, aunts) who provided emotional and instrumental support during the pre-university period. The RSA and peers provided emotional support at the beginning of university, and the local government provided instrumental support through student dormitories.

Summary of results

In this section, we summarize each social-support factor and its function in relation to access and equity. Table 2 highlights both supportive and challenging aspects of family and teacher contributions to HE access. While mothers offered valuable instrumental aid, some relatives expressed concerns about finances. Families faced challenges due to unfamiliarity with HE, leading to a lack of support and concerns about costs. In addition, secondary school staff and local governments played essential roles in supporting Bidikmisi alumni.

Table 2

Social-Support Factors and Functions in Relation to Access and Equity for Bidikmisi Alumni

SSF	Family		Teacher and Lecturer		Peers		Staff		Local government		RSA	
	access	equity	access	equity	access	equity	access	equity	access	equity	access	equity
Emotional	√		√	√	√		√				N/A	√
Informational	√		√		√		√				N/A	√
Instrumental	√		√	√	√			√	√	√	N/A	√

Note. SSF = Social Support Function; N/A=not available

In university life (equity), lecturers played a vital role through emotional and instrumental support. Peers contributed emotional, informational, and instrumental aid. University staff and local governments provided instrumental support, while RSAs offered various forms of social support. During university years, family influence seemed to shift to peers, RSAs, and lecturers.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to delves into the dynamics of social support in HE access and equity, specifically within the context of Indonesia, a developing country. While social support's importance in HE is widely acknowledged, existing research has predominantly focused on developed countries (Wanti et al., 2022). This study aims to intricately detail the types and impact of support provided by influential actors such as family, peers, teachers, and lecturers, focusing on individual alumni perceptions. By concentrating on Indonesia, the research offers a unique lens into the role of social support in a developing country, contributing valuable insights distinct from more developed settings. Bridging the literature gap, this research sheds light on the nuanced nature of social support in the HE journey, with implications for enhancing access and equity in developing country contexts.

This study is intended to provide deeper insight into the roles and functions of social factors for LSES students (especially Bidikmisi alumni) in terms of access to and equity in HE in Indonesia. In this discussion, we highlight the relevancy of the results in light of previous findings and additional factors. Emotional and instrumental support emerged most prominently across all findings, and family played an important role in the pre-university life of each participant. It is nevertheless important to note that, in this study, family provided both positive and negative support.

In general, our results confirm previous findings on access to and equity in HE, as reported by Wanti et al., (2023). The same actors (family, teachers, lecturers, peers, and local government) appeared important, and the results provide greater insight into the nature of the factors. Secondary-school administrative staff and university RSAs emerged as additional factors crucial to Bidikmisi alumni.

Family and teachers provided information, instrumental, and emotional support in HE access. In addition, during secondary school, teachers provided many important types of support: emotional (e.g., motivation), informational (e.g., relating to Bidikmisi), and instrumental (e.g., registration fees, printing). Such support is crucial to LSES students in terms of HE access, even if their own parents or close relatives are not in favor of them going to university. This finding suggests that secondary-school need to give more attention to LSES students who have the potential to pursue HE.

Our findings support prior research, emphasizing the crucial role of teachers in facilitating access to HE for LSES students. Consistent with studies such as Garza and Garza (2010), successful teachers not only assist students in navigating the educational system but also provide essential support, fostering resilience while preserving cultural identity and dignity (Garza, 1998; Scheurich, 1998; Valdéz, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). This underscores the significant impact of teachers on the academic success of LSES students, as evidenced by our study and existing literature.

In addition, as noted by many scholars, social support (including from peers) is crucial for students during the process of adjusting to a new university environment (Arevalo et al., 2016; Chiang et al.,

2004; Dennis et al., 2005). For LSES students, social support, including assistance from peers, plays a pivotal role during the transition to a new university environment. The adjustment process can be challenging, and having a supportive social network helps alleviate the stress and anxiety associated with adapting to unfamiliar academic and social contexts. Peers can provide valuable guidance, share experiences, and create a sense of belonging, fostering a supportive community that positively influences LSES students' overall well-being and academic success.

During the university trajectory, lecturers play a crucial role by providing emotional and instrumental support. During the thesis process, lecturers provide emotional support (e.g., motivation to graduate on time) and instrumental support (e.g., by involving students in their research projects and covering the laboratory fees). Consistent with this finding, Lovitts (2001) reports that students who do not complete their studies are more likely to complain about the poor quality of their relationships with or lack of support from their former advisors. These dropouts identify a range of unsupportive behaviors and unfulfilled needs, ranging from not receiving practical tips and advice to feeling low levels of emotional support (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2019). In addition, as observed by Curtin et al. (2013), support from the supervisor is correlated with a graduate's sense of academic success.

While most previous studies have focused on a singular educational level, such as secondary school or university, the present study offers a comprehensive examination of students' academic journey encompassing both secondary and university education levels. By considering the transition from secondary school to university and subsequently examining performance at the university level, this research provides a holistic perspective on students' educational trajectories. Analysing the trajectory of students and identifying supporting factors not only fills a significant gap in the existing literature but also offers practical insights. Understanding these trajectories and the factors that influence them can potentially improve access and equity in HE, particularly for students from LSES backgrounds.

In Gofen's (2009) qualitative study, which examined first-generation students in a developed country, it was observed that social support, encompassing family capital like interpersonal relationships and family values, seemed to significantly enhance academic success among first-generation college students. Moreover, family influence appeared to extend beyond parental qualifications, potentially serving as a crucial source of social support for all student demographics (Abukari, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Nelson, 2019; Theodore et al., 2017).

Based on these studies, it could be suggested that the role of social factors in supporting access and equity in HE may be relevant not only in developing countries like Indonesia but also in other developed countries. However, it's important to note that in Indonesia, as a representative of developing countries, the influence of social factors extends beyond family capital to include other stakeholders such as teachers, peers, lecturers, high school and university staff, and local government.

This study draws attention to various factors that have not been previously explored in our own or other existing studies. These novel elements encompass the support offered by administrative staff at secondary schools, Regional Student Associations, and local government entities. In our earlier studies, we primarily focused on social factors involving teachers (at the high school level), family, peers, mentors (in mentoring programs), and lecturers (at the university level). While most previous studies often discuss the role of local government, the role of regional student associations and administrative staff at the secondary level in supporting access and equity in HE is rarely addressed.

First, the role of secondary-school administrative staff has been largely ignored in previous studies (e.g., Wanti et al., 2022). The present study indicates that secondary-school staff supported Bidikmisi alumni by (a) providing informational support (e.g., on the Bidikmisi program and registration), and (b) providing emotional support (e.g., motivation to apply to the Bidikmisi program). This finding supports Choy (2001), who reports that first-generation students (including LSES students) received help from secondary-school staff when completing financial-aid applications. Hudley et al. (2009) found that adolescents who frequently discuss their HE plans with administrative staff in high school are more likely to adjust successfully during the transition to HE.

Second, RSAs played a prominent role by providing emotional, informational, and instrumental support at the beginning of university life. In terms of instrumental support, RSAs mostly collect funds from their members. In a cyclical process, the RSA arranges for older students to assist new students, who

subsequently assist younger students at the end of their university studies. This finding is unique, as most previous studies on university student associations focus on hobbies, sports, or political views. Our respondents also received emotional, informational, and instrumental support from student associations from their home regions.

To substantiate the broader role of student associations, particularly in international contexts, Briggs et al. (2019) illustrate that entities like Students' Unions in the UK extend a spectrum of services. These services encompass not only advice and support services but also a diverse range of activities, including societies and sports clubs, volunteering opportunities, part-time employment options, social events, and commercial services such as dining establishments and retail outlets. This reference helps contextualize our findings within a broader framework of student association functions, highlighting their significance beyond the immediate university environment.

Third, the literature often limits the discussion of the local government's role to policy formulation (Wanti et al., 2022). However, this study reveals that local governments, particularly at the provincial level, play a crucial role in both access and equity in education. Concerning access, local governments offer free schooling during pre-university years, while, in terms of equity, they provide student housing at the university level. Their involvement goes beyond policy decisions; local governments actively implement these measures by offering instrumental support. Despite differences across Indonesian provinces in supporting LSES students, this research emphasizes that not all provinces provide student housing or free secondary schooling for these students. Thus, it stresses the significance of recognizing the diverse roles played by local governments in supporting LSES students.

Most studies investigating social support in relation to the transition to university adopt a psychological perspective. The findings indicate that social support is vital to successful adjustment to university life (Lamothe et al., 1995) and that support from different sources (e.g., peers, tutors, parents) play different roles (Tao et al., 2000). The literature includes few sociological analyses of the structural and material aspects of social support (Wilcox et al., 2005). In the present study, of three distinct forms of support (emotional, instrumental, informational), emotional and instrumental support were most prominent across all findings, with informational support playing a somewhat smaller role. We speculate that this may be because the respondents did not regard informational support as support per se, but as belonging to the regular duties of lecturers.

A family's role in supporting students from a LSES background to pursue HE can have both supportive and challenging aspects. A supportive family environment, characterized by an awareness of the importance of HE, can offer emotional encouragement such as motivation. Despite financial limitations, such families will find ways to support their children's university education. This support nurtures a sense of belonging and confidence, both crucial elements for students navigating the challenges of HE. On the other hand, challenges may arise if the family lacks awareness of the crucial nature of HE. They may hold the belief that HE is exclusively for wealthy families and is prohibitively expensive, making it unaffordable. With this mindset, even if there are scholarships or financial aid options available for their children, they may not support their pursuit of university studies. A lack of familiarity with the intricacies of HE might make it challenging for the family to provide effective guidance, inadvertently creating barriers for the student.

This finding is consistent with other studies indicating that LSES parents can contribute to factors that enhance the academic success of their children, as well as to those that place them at risk for academic failure (Watkins & Howard, 2015).

Our finding that families do not always support their children's desire to pursue HE is consistent with previous evidence that university students do not always receive the full support of their families, as their parents believe that HE is not an option or that it is exclusively for elite, wealthy families (Rendon, 1992). In addition, Roksa and Kinsley (2019) report that emotional support from the family plays an important role in fostering positive academic outcomes, and is beneficial to promoting psychological well-being and facilitating greater student engagement.

Previous studies on the HE experiences of LSES students have found that LSES students are less likely to be academically prepared for college, that they have lower GPAs, less social and financial support, less campus involvement, and that they are most likely to leave college without a degree (Jury et al.,

2017). The findings of this study suggest that due to the limited participant sample, there is an indication that emotional support (e.g., motivation or reinforcement of the ability to pursue HE), instrumental support (e.g., assistance with registration fees, photocopies), and informational support (e.g., Bidikmisi terms and conditions) provided by various actors, may contribute to the successful completion of university degrees and subsequent employment opportunities for our respondents.

The provision of emotional, informational and instrumental support by secondary school teachers and staff has significance in facilitating access to university for LSES students. This support is crucial in attracting the attention of school authorities or school committees, especially for students identified as having the potential to pursue university education through initiatives such as Bidikmisi. Additionally, it assists students in navigating the university admissions process, thereby increasing their chances of successfully entering HE.

In conclusion, the results of this study support previous evidence concerning the role of social factors (e.g., family, teachers, lecturers, and peers). The results also reveal additional social factors contributing to access to and equity in HE for LSES students, including secondary-school administrative staff, university student organizations, university scholarship or student-office staff, and local governments. Most importantly, our respondents would probably have never made it to graduation without this support.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's findings are based on the experiences of only six Bidikmisi recipients, suggesting the need for future research to encompass a larger and more diverse sample size. This would yield more comprehensive insights into the topic and validate emerging findings. While this study primarily examines successful alumni perspectives, future research could delve into the supporting factors and barriers faced by LSES secondary school students or less successful alumni. Such insights could inform policies, educational programs, and support services for LSES students. Additionally, including LSES students who did not complete their university studies could elucidate whether their lack of success stemmed from inadequate support or other factors, an aspect not covered in the present study.

Recommendations and Practical Implications

Our findings highlight financial constraints as a barrier to family support for HE. Promoting the Bidikmisi program should target students and parents, potentially involving school committees. To ease financial burdens, exempting LSES students from registration fees at the national level is advised. Additionally, a university-level program could aid Bidikmisi students in optimizing various factors for improved academic performance.

Initial parental reservations due to financial constraints were overcome through awareness of the Bidikmisi program's extensive coverage, including tuition and living expenses. To enhance program reach, the Indonesian Ministry of Education should expand promotion beyond secondary schools and involve school committees for broader dissemination.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests.
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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