

# Overcoming inequalities in access to higher education

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Higher education is gaining momentum as a focal policy point on the international development agenda. Following its neglect in the Education for All movement and Millennium Development Goals, the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals include a specific target on higher education, with a particular focus on achieving equality of access to higher education for all. This attention indicates a renewal in focus included in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that 'higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit' (UN, 1948).

The renewed focus on higher education is linked with recent evidence that it contributes to economic development and poverty reduction, and is therefore a contributor to other post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. As a consequence, governments and international aid agencies are concerned with identifying the best use of their investment to realise the potential of higher education. It is essential, therefore, to explore the extent to which such efforts have the potential to deal with wide inequalities in access to, and the quality of provision of, higher education.

This article identifies patterns in inequality in access to higher education in 34 low-and lower-middle-income countries, with a focus on countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa where education challenges persist. Almost half of the selected countries are part of the Commonwealth. This article identifies that achieving a post-2015 target of equality in higher education access by 2030 in these countries will be a serious challenge. It then explores the distribution of education funding in these countries as one potential explanation for the wide wealth and gender gaps that will need to be tackled to make progress towards such a target.

## Low enrolment rates and wide inequalities in access

Access to higher education has increased from a very low base in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia over the past 15 years. Progress has been slow in Sub-Saharan Africa, where only four per cent of young people gained access in 1999, the outset of the Millennium Development Goals, increasing to just eight per cent by 2012. Progress has been faster in South Asia, increasing from eight per cent to 23 per cent over this period (UNESCO-UIS, 2015). Drawing on recent data from the Demographic and Health Surveys Program (DHS, 2015) from 34 countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, we found that participation in higher education for young people under the age of 25 is below ten per cent in 31 of these countries, and below five per cent in 19 countries. Net enrolment rates in higher education are generally lower in Sub-Saharan African countries, with just two per cent of young people enrolled, on average, in countries including Niger, Mozambique, Rwanda

and Tanzania. While still modest, higher education net enrolment rates reach 15 per cent in Pakistan, 16 per cent in Bangladesh and 28 per cent in Nepal.

A particularly stark picture emerges when comparing the poorest and richest half of young people within these countries. In six of the countries (Burkina Faso, Malawi, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Zambia) none of the poorest half of young people have access to higher education (see Figure 1). While only four of the countries (Comoros, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan) have at least five per cent of the poorest half of young people with access to higher education. Even in these countries, a rich young person is three to five times more likely to attend higher education than a poor young person.

Globally, young women are more likely to attend higher education than young men. However, in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa this pattern is reversed: only 81 young women are enrolled for every 100 young men in South Asia, with a ratio of 64 young women for 100 young men in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2015). Analysis of household survey data shows that, in the 19 countries with enrolment rates of less than five per cent, enrolment is low for both young men and women, and is equal or higher for young women in five of these countries. In countries with higher levels of overall access, there is a wide gap in access in favour of young men. For example, 35 per cent of young men are enrolled in Nepal compared with 24 per cent of young women. This suggests that when young people have the chance to access higher education in poorer countries it is disproportionately the men that do so.

Wealth and gender often interact to determine young people's chances of entering higher education. In 19 of the 22 countries where at least some of the poorest are enrolled it is the poorest young women who are the least likely to be in higher education. In 15 of these countries it is the richest young men who are most likely to be enrolled; in the majority of the other countries the difference to the benefit of women is marginal, with the exception of Comoros and Namibia. In some of the higher enrolment countries the gap between poor young women and poor young men is particularly stark. In Guinea, for example, less than 0.1 per cent of poor young women are enrolled compared with 1.1 per cent of poor young men, and 15 per cent of rich young men. As access to higher education expands the challenge is, therefore, to ensure that growth occurs equitably.

## Reinforcement of inequalities in accessing higher education

Large wealth-based gaps in access to higher education are closely related to the distribution of government resources across levels of

education. The state is not the sole, or, in some cases, the main, provider of higher education – in many countries, households also contribute to spending on education. However, the distribution of state resources among the poorest and richest groups in a society provides valuable evidence about the potential of each country to address existing inequalities.

Drawing on government expenditure data from the World Bank and UNESCO-UIS combined with enrolment rates for primary, secondary and higher education by wealth quintile, we calculated the ratio of government spending between the poorest and the richest 20 per cent of people. This ‘benefit–incidence analysis’ provides a picture of the extent to which public expenditure benefits the poor or the rich at each level of education.

For primary education, public spending in around half of the 34 countries is pro-poor: that is, there is a higher share of government expenditure on the poorest quintile of the population than on the richest quintile. For example, in Bangladesh, where primary government spending is pro-poor, for every £100 spent on the poorest 20 per cent of the population £65 is spent on the richest 20 per cent. A country like Mali is pro-rich: the state spends twice as much on the richest 20 per cent of the population as on the poorest 20 per cent.

By contrast, public spending is in favour of the rich in all of the 34 countries at both secondary and higher education levels. The incidence of higher education spending in favour of the rich is particularly stark: around 20 times higher for the rich in Nepal, Rwanda, Niger and Bangladesh, increasing to more than 1,000 times higher in Côte d’Ivoire, Zimbabwe and Cameroon, where the extremely low enrolment of poor young people in higher education leads to almost none of the government expenditure being targeted at the poorest quintile. This highlights the fact that the current distribution of public spending is extremely regressive.

Importantly, our analysis of household survey data indicates that access to higher education is linked to inequalities lower in the system. In Niger, for example, only 43 per cent of the poorest children attend primary school, and only eight per cent of the poorest attend secondary school. The very low enrolment in higher education in Niger (around 0.1 per cent for the poorest and two per cent for the richest) is, therefore, hardly surprising. As such, approaches to financing higher education need to take into account the fact that the rich are more likely to progress through the education system at all stages and so disproportionately access higher education, and that they also have a greater ability to pay. Public resources, therefore, need to be targeted towards strengthening primary and secondary schooling to ensure that no one is left behind, while providing higher education subsidies for the poor who have succeeded in completing secondary school.

The skewed distribution of public finance towards the rich raises questions about where aid donors should best allocate their resources if they are to contribute to poverty alleviation objectives. There is no doubt that more resources are needed to improve the quality of education across the system and that the capacity of higher education systems is, in many poor countries, in need of strengthening. However, in many poor countries, some of the most marginalised groups (most frequently the poorest girls living in remote rural areas or urban slums, and in particular children with disabilities) do not even complete primary school and have little

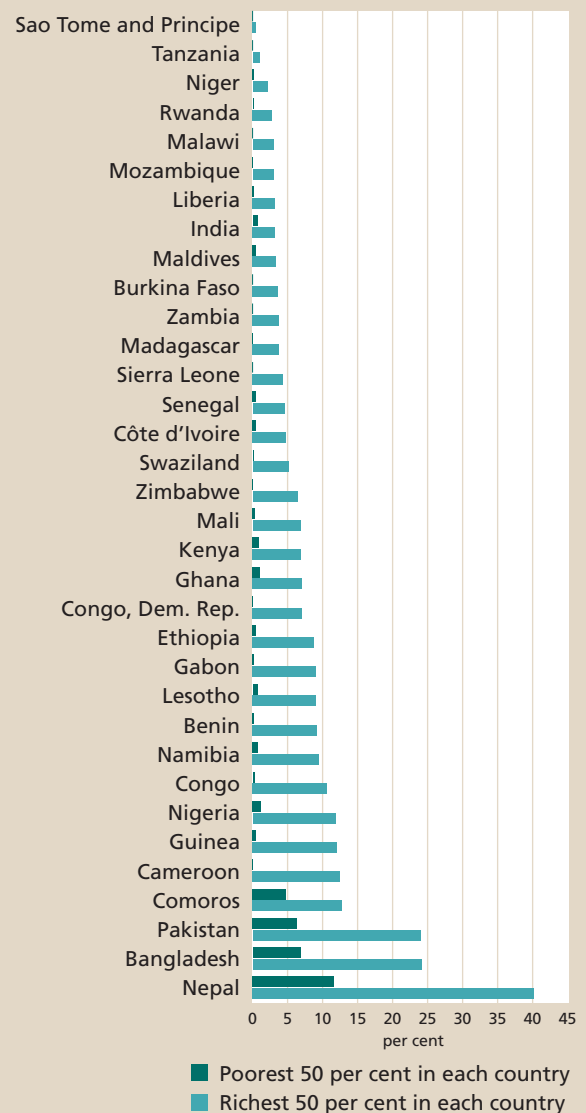
hope of gaining access to higher education. This suggests a balanced approach to aid donor funding across education levels is needed, which targets the most marginalised at all levels, if post-2015 goals of equal access to higher education are to be achieved.

This implies that a re-orientation is required from the current distribution of aid donor resources, a significant proportion of which are directed towards scholarships for young people to study within donor countries, accounting for one-quarter of total aid to education (and three-quarters of aid to higher education). This aid generally only reaches those from more privileged backgrounds (UNESCO, 2014). Rather, aid resources need to be allocated towards strengthening education systems for the most disadvantaged within the poorest countries themselves, paying

### Figure 1

#### In Sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries, very few of the poorest young people access higher education

Net higher education attendance rates, young people under the age of 25, by wealth



Source: Demographic and Health Survey data

attention to accessibility and quality of primary and secondary schooling, if these young people are to have a hope of entering higher education.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that wide wealth gaps in access to higher education are prevalent in some of the world's poorest countries, often reinforced by gender gaps. These gaps are associated with the uneven distribution of public spending across levels of education, which means that more of these resources are spent on children and young people from the richest households who have a far greater chance of reaching higher education. If post-2015 targets of equal access to higher education are to be achieved, there is a need to ensure public and aid donor resources address inequalities that appear early in the education system. Only then can we hope that all young people, regardless of their circumstance, can have an equal chance of gaining access to higher education and so fulfil their potential in ways that enable them to contribute to their country's prosperity and poverty reduction efforts.

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