Bulletin of Education and Research
April 2019, Vol. 41, No. 1 pp. 185-201

Equitable Higher Education: Students' Perspective on Access to Resources, Participation, and Educational Outcomes

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Abstract

Equity refers to fairness in education, which represents all irrespective of any differences with the goal of access, participation and progression in education. The study, thus, analyzed students' equity in terms of access, participation and outcomes at higher education. The data had been collected from 641 students enrolled in three public sector general universities of the Punjab using multistage sampling technique. The tool of the study was a self-developed questionnaire, comprising 65 items on Likert-type scale. The quantitative data analysis included percentage analysis, correlation, *t-test* and ANOVA. The study confirmed the link of equitable access and equitable participation to equitable educational outcomes. The results presented the less positive situation of equity in public sector higher education, whether related to equitable access to resources, equitable participation and equitable educational outcomes. Significant differences were also observed in students' equity, with respect to family income and mother education. Findings suggested that the education system needed to commit to the principle of fairness leading to equitable higher education.

Keywords: Equity, Access, Participation, Equitable educational outcomes

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Introduction

Education is increasingly becoming a vehicle for the economic prosperity of the countries worldwide. Therefore, growing concern for the increasing effectiveness of the education systems is to generate quality human capital to contribute to the economic prosperity of the country. In this respect, higher education is a means to produce human capital for the knowledge-based economies around globe (Salem, 2014).

Education is linked to upward social mobility. In order that education provides equal chances of upward social mobility to each and every individual of society, there should be equality of opportunity for each. Equal opportunity means that all people in a society have equal chances to develop into high social classes irrespective of any personal hindrances, such as gender, socio economic status or ethnicity (Ballantine, Roberts, & Korgen, 2017). Thus, the need for establishing fair education systems, where all have equal chances to develop is inevitable.

Globally, the education is said to be equitable, when educational practices, policies, curricula, resources are representative of all students, such that each student has access to, can participate in and make progress in high quality learning experiences, regardless of her or his race, socio-economic status, gender, ability, religion, national origin and linguistic diversity (Skelton & Kigamwa, 2013). Enhancing equity in education leads to improved economic, social and individual outcomes, as boosting skills of every student; and increase chances for employments and productivity (OECD, 2012). Thus, addressing equity at an initial level of access only, is limited and thus insufficient to declare equitable character of the education system (Meuret, 2002).

According to Rawls' theory of justice, equity necessitates equality, however, it requires benefitting the least advantaged the most (Centre of equity in education, 2014). Therefore, whether the equalities or inequalities; as far as those are just; are equitable. Another aspect is that equity does not cease individual potential, ability and effort to excel. The meritocratic approach to equity entails that inequalities arising on basis of personal ability and effort are considered just and thus not an inequity with others (Meuret, 2002).

Pakistan's national educational policy 2009 (Government of Pakistan, 2009) understands equity as ensuring equitable access to education eliminating rural/urban divide and gender disparity for enhancing enrolments. According to Batool and Qureshi (2009), equity has been a key principle of quality assurance mechanism of Higher Education Commission in Pakistan which targets at 'Quality Assurance' and uplifting standards of higher education in Pakistan. It intends to bring openness, transparency, and accountability in the education system to ensure equitable participation by all at higher education without discrimination and providing opportunities to fully utilize their abilities for the benefit of the higher education and society as a whole.

Equity is a matter of basic human rights (Willems, 2011). Equity of access is implying provision of equitable access to the underprivileged of the society that includes people living in the underdeveloped or rural areas (Hutmacher, Cochrane & Bottani, 2002). Bringing equality in a society is important where children have very different opportunities depending upon where they live, how much income is there to support them and what type and quality of education they have access to, what is their gender, whether the parents are educated or not, how do they aspire their children and what social strata they belong to (Bari, 2014).

The world through quest of achieving targets of Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and now committed to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030) is striving to provide equitable access to the children of disadvantaged class as they run at a higher risk to remain unable to enter into the mainstream education (Sheikh, 2016). The report by AEPAM (2011) appreciated continuingefforts by Pakistan for the provision of the equitable access to primary education in the disadvantaged areas in Pakistan, where millions of children cannot access basic education.

On the other hand, equity in access to education just does not mean access to basic education. A study in Pakistan by Khan (1995) highlighted equity in terms of fair and just admission policies, where in a leading university, lower income group was under-enrolled relative to its population size and a larger representation of high income groups, relative to its population size in the admissions was observed.

The scope of equity in education is very wide. According to Mirci, Loomis and Hensley (2011), the scope of equity may extend to ensuring equitable educational practices too, including classroom instructional practices, educational resources, teachers' attention, curricula, assessments, interactions, attitudes, language and institutional cultures. Most importantly it focuses on equity with disadvantaged groups. Australia's Higher Education Standards Framework (2014) ensures students' equitable participation in higher education which is viewed in terms of fair and consistent admission policies, ensuring students' required skills for a fuller educational participation, granting credit to recognise prior education, students' placements, specifying learning outcomes for each course and designing appropriate assessment techniques that are reflections of students' attainment.

The world, through the efforts of OECD countries, has diverted and focused attention on enhancing educational outcomes of students at different levels all over the world. Though success or failure heavily depends upon students' own efforts, however, institutional factors may be responsible for students' educational outcomes (Bauman 2005). Australian Government Higher Education Standards (2014), also stressed that social systems (including education systems) are a source of producing inequitable outcomes because the processes involved in the production of social and economic outcomes are unfair, thus bringing equity in this context means producing equitable social

outcomes. Unequal outcomes are perceived as performance inequality due to segregated education system at post-primary level according to Borooah and Knox (2015). Equitable outcomes imply that learners may successfully progress and reach the completion of education for ensuring their social mobility, earning money and improving the quality of their lives.

Hence, the study considered notions of social justice (Fraser, 2001) and fairness, to explore equity in terms of equitable access to resources, equitable participation and equitable outcomes of the learners in higher education.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to;

1. find out university students' perspectives on equitable access to resources, equitable participation and equitable educational outcomes
2. explore the relationship between equitable educational access to resources, equitable educational participation and educational outcomes of students
3. assess the significant differences in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on the basis of students' demographics

Hypotheses

H_{o1} There is no relationship between students' equitable access to resources and students' equitable educational outcomes

$H_{o2.}$ There is no relationship between students' equitable participation and students' equitable educational outcomes

$H_{o3.}$ There is no significant gender difference in students' equitable access, equitable participation and equitable outcomes on gender basis

$H_{o4.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on locality basis

$H_{o5.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on family's monthly income basis

$H_{o6.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on the basis of father's education

$H_{o7.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on the basis of mother's education

$H_{o8.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on father's occupation basis

$H_{o9.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on mother's occupation basis

Research Methodology

This exploratory study was descriptive in nature and used quantitative data to explore the state of equity in higher education.

Population and Sample

Population of the study comprised all students from general public universities in the province Punjab. Three general public universities were randomly selected from total of 27 general public universities in the Punjab. Three universities were randomly selected via balloting, that constituted almost 10% of the population. In the second stage, each selected university was divided into two major strata of arts and sciences from where the sample had been drawn from the departments. Data were collected from 641 final year students from Masters (MA 3rd and 4th semester) and BS (7th and 8th Semester) via purposive sampling from intact groups in class timings by seeking prior permission from the teachers.

Research Instrument

Absence of standardized instruments for measuring equity in education led to construct the questionnaire for the study. The dimensions and the indicators of equity were based on the recent literature on equity (Ainscow, Dyson, and Kerr, 2006; Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & Kerr, 2008; Gorard, 2011; Meuret, 2002). For the purpose of tool development, focus group interviews were also conducted on three different groups of students, following deductive approach. Consequently, researchers got enriched information from participants, which were also incorporated in the questionnaires. For example, many issues related to teachers' behaviors and classroom practices found place in the questionnaires. The questionnaire of the study comprised of demographic information and 65 items on 5 point Likert-type scale related to equity as equitable access, equitable participation and equitable outcomes. Following picture explains the indicators of the study:

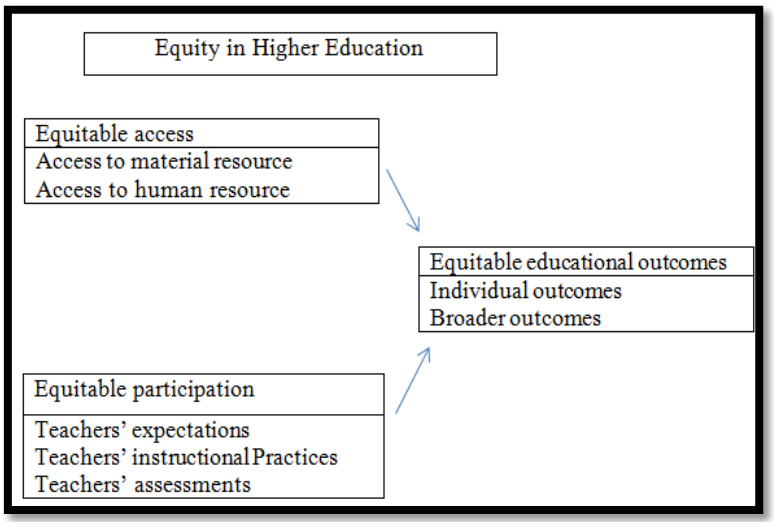

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

Validity and Reliability

The validity of the research had been ensured by seeking opinions from field experts. During the phase, research objectives, research questions and questionnaires were completely aligned with each other. Reliability of the questionnaire was ensured through pilot testing of the research instrument. Values of Cronbach alpha coefficients are given in the following table.

Table 1

Reliability measures for students', teachers' and heads' questionnaire

Sr. No	Variables	Cronbach Alpha	No. of Items
1	Equitable access to resources	.893	13
2	Equitable participation	.899	39
3	Equitable outcomes	.868	13
	Total	.886	65

Data Analysis

Data had been analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. Percentage analysis is presented as *'equity'*, *'inequity'* and *'undecided'* on each sub scale and grand percentage on *'equity'*, *'inequity'* and *'undecided'* on key variables. Percentage on *'equity'* was calculated by taking together scores of *'strongly agree'* and *'agree'*, on statements whereas percentage on *'inequity'* was calculated by taking together scores of *'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'*, on statements. Inferential statistics included Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient for finding relationship between variables, and independent sample *t*-test and one way analysis of variance ANOVA for comparing different groups of students on equity variables.

Table 2

Students' perspectives on equity

Variables	Subscales	Equity%	Undecided%	Inequity%
Equitable access	Equitable access to material resource	50.45	15.2	34.35
	Equitable access to human resource	61.45	21.88	16.67
	Total	55.95	18.54	25.51
Equitable participation	Equitable expectation	57.9	21.2	20.9
	Equitable classroom practices	45.75	22.9	31.35
	Equitable assessments	55.8	21.15	23.05
	Total	53.15	21.75	25.1
Equitable outcomes	Individual outcomes	64	22.3	13.7
	Equitable broader outcomes	36.65	27.8	35.55
	Total	50.32	25.05	24.63

Table 2 showed that equitable conditions in terms of access, participation and outcomes which were 50% on average, whereas inequities at higher education had been identified around 20% on average, which was a striking percentage. Percentage on 'undecided' above 20% on average, was still striking which either reflected ignorance or/ and confusion on part of the sample on equity matters.

Hypothesis Testing

H_{o1} There is no relationship between students' equitable access to resources and students' equitable educational outcomes

Table 3

Pearson Correlation among students' access to resources and equitable educational outcomes

Variable	Outcomes	R^2
Equitable access to resources	.285**	0.081

** p< .01

Table 3 showed that equitable access to resources and equitable educational outcomes were significantly positively correlated, r= .285, p = .01. Scatter Plot to this correlation is shown below:

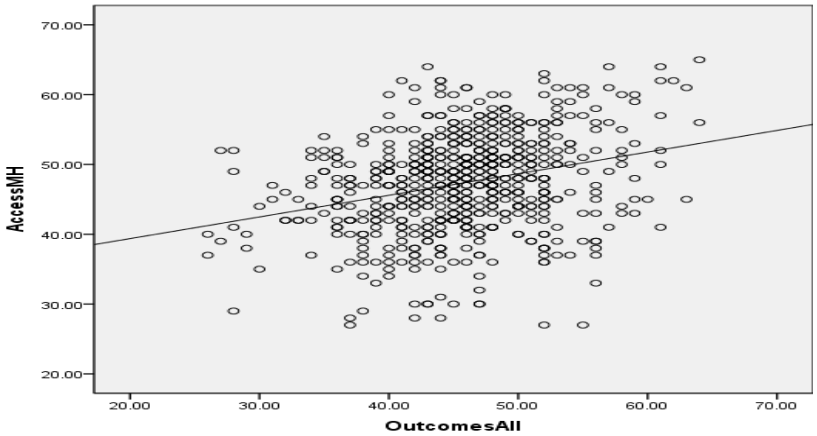

Figure 2. Scatter plot for students' equitable access to resources and equitable educational outcomes

$H_{o2.}$ There is no relationship between students' equitable participation and students' equitable educational outcomes

Table 4

Pearson Correlation among students' equitable participation and equitable educational outcomes

Variable	Outcomes	R^2
Equitable participation	.483**	.233

Table 4 confirmed that equitable participation and equitable educational outcomes were significantly correlated, r= .483, p< .01.

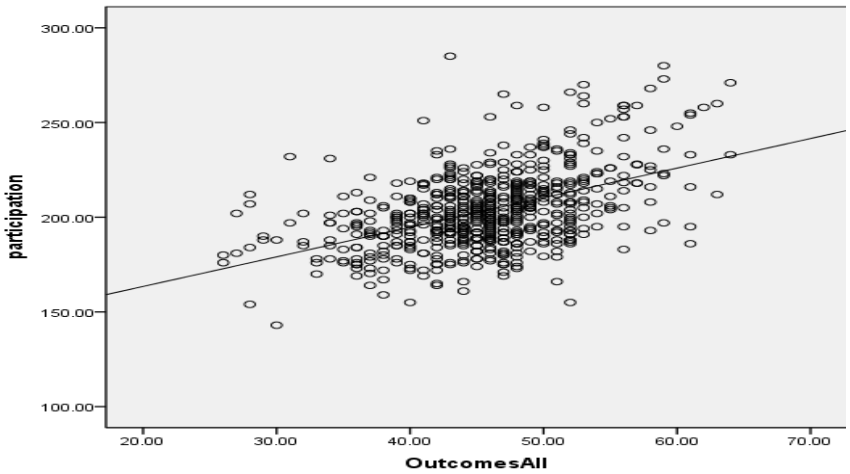

Figure 3. Scatter plot for relationship between students' equitable participation and equitable educational outcomes

$H_{o3.}$ There is no significant gender difference in students' equitable access, equitable participation and equitable outcomes on gender basis

Table 5

Independent sample t-Test for gender differences in equitable access, participation, outcomes

Equity variables	Gender	N	Mean	SD	*t*	*Df*	*P*
Access	Male	181	47.629	7.33114	.636	639	.525
	Female	460	47.243	6.75477			
Participation	Male	181	202.7221	21.20232	-.708	639	.479
	Female	460	203.9972	20.2706			
Outcomes	Male	181	45.8674	7.32910	.374	639	.708
	Female	460	45.6587	5.92646			

Table 5 showed that there was no significant difference in students' equitable access to resources between male students (M= 47.62, SD= 7.33) and female students (M= 47.24, SD = 6.75), t = .636, p = .525. There was no significant difference in students' equitable participation between male students (M= 202.72, SD = 21.20) and female students

(M= 203.99, SD = 20.20), *t* = -.708, p = .479. There was no significant difference in students' equitable outcomes between male students (M= 45.86, SD= 7.32) and female students (M= 45.6587, SD = 5.92646) on levels of equitable outcomes, *t* = .374, p = .708.

$H_{o4.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on locality basis

Table 6
Independent sample t-Test comparing access, participation and outcomes on locality basis

Equity variables	Locality	N	Mean	SD	*t*	*Df*	*P*
Access	Rural	115	47.3739	7.19339	.036	639	.971
	Urban	526	47.3479	6.86431			
Participation	Rural	115	199.1200	18.32059	-2.617	639	.009
	Urban	526	204.6247	20.86849			
Outcomes	Rural	115	44.6435	7.22956	-2.008	639	.045
	Urban	526	45.9525	6.12191			

Table 6 revealed that there was no significant difference in equitable access to resources between students from rural locality (M= 47.37, SD= 7.19)and students from urban locality (M= 47.34, SD= 6.86),*t*= .036, p = .971.There was significant difference in students' equitable participation such that students from rural locality (M= 199.12, SD= 18.32)had significantly lower equitable participation than students from urban locality, (M= 204.62, SD= 20.86),*t*= 2.617, p = .009. Students from rural locality (M= 44.64, SD=7.22)had significantly lower equitable outcomes than students from urban locality (M= 45.95, SD= 6.12),*t*= -2.008, p<0.5.

$H_{o5.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on family's monthly income basis

Table 7
ANOVA comparisons of students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on basis of family income

Equity variables	Variance	*Df*	*F*	*P*
Access	Between Groups	3	4.632	.003
	Within Groups	637		
	Total	640		
Participation	Between Groups	3	.877	.453
	Within Groups	637		
	Total	640		
Outcomes	Between Groups	3	.315	.815
	Within Groups	637		
	Total	640		

Table 7 showed that there was a significant difference in students' equitable access to resources F (3, 637) = 4.632, p < .05,on basis of students' family's monthly income. There was no significant difference in students' equitable participation, F (3, 637) = .877 p= .453, and students' equitable educational outcomes F (3, 637) = .315, p= .815, on basis of students' family's monthly income. LSD post hoc test result to this comparison is given below.

Table 8

LSD post hoc comparison on basis of family's monthly income

Dependent variable	(I) Family Income	(J) Family Income	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Access to resources	11,000-30,000	31,000-50,000	.64827	.90539	.000
	31,000-50,000	70,000 and above	-1.89120	.93593	.044

LSD post hoc comparisons in Table 8 indicated that students with family's monthly income between 11,000- 30,000 had significantly greater equitable access to resources than students with family income between 31,000-50,000. Students with family's monthly income between 31,000-50,000had significantly less equitable access to resources than students with family income 70,000 above.

$H_{o6.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on the basis of father's education

Table 9

ANOVA comparisons of students' equitable access, participation and outcome on basis of father's education

Equity variables	Variance	*Df*	*F*	*P*
Access	Between Groups	4	.988	.413
	Within Groups	636		
	Total	640		
Participation	Between Groups	4	1.305	.267
	Within Groups	636		
	Total	640		
Outcomes	Between Groups	4	1.098	.356
	Within Groups	636		
	Total	640		

Table 9 showed that there was no significant difference in students' equitable access F (4,636) = .988, p= .413, students' equitable participation F (4,636) = 1.305, p=.267, and students' equitable outcomes F (4,636) = 1.098, p= .356, on the basis of students' father's education.

$H_{o7.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on basis of mother's education

Table 10
ANOVA comparisons of students' equitable access, participation and outcome on basis of mothers' education

Equity variables		Df	*F*	*P*
Access	Between Groups	3	.643	.587
	Within Groups	637		
	Total	640		
Participation	Between Groups	3	3.559	.014
	Within Groups	637		
	Total	640		
Outcomes	Between Groups	3	1.828	.141
	Within Groups	637		
	Total	640		

Table 10 revealed that there was no significant difference in students' equitable access to resources F (3,637) = .643, p= .587, and students' equitable outcomes F (3, 637) = 1.828, p= .141, on basis of students' mother's education. There was no significant difference in students' students' equitable participation F (3, 637) = 3.559, p<.05, on basis of students' mother's education. LSD post hoc test result to this comparison is given below.

Table 11
LSD post hoc comparison on basis of mothers' education

Dependent variable	(I) Mother Education	(J) Mother Education	Mean Diff. (I-J)	Std.Error	*P*
Participation	Uneducated	Matric, FA	-4.47421	2.24919	.047
		Graduation & above	-5.15952	2.57684	.046
	Under Matric	Matric, FA	-5.54999	2.15095	.010
		Graduation & above	-6.23530	2.49155	.013

LSD post hoc comparison in Table 11 shows that students with uneducated mothers have significantly lower equitable participation than students with mothers' qualification of matriculation to FA and students with mothers' qualification of graduation and above. Students with mothers' qualification below matriculation report significantly less equitable participation than students with mothers' qualification of matriculation to FA and students with mothers' qualification of graduation and above.

$H_{o8.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on father's occupation basis

Table 12
ANOVA comparison of students' equitable access, participation and outcome on basis of fathers' occupation

Equity variables	Variance	*Df*	*F*	*P*
Access	Between Groups	4	1.975	.097
	Within Groups	636		
	Total	640		
Participation	Between Groups	4	1.575	.179
	Within Groups	636		
	Total	640		
Outcomes	Between Groups	4	1.038	.387
	Within Groups	636		
	Total	640		

Table 12 showed that there was no significant difference in students' equitable access to resources F (4,636) = 1.975, p= .097, students' equitable participation, F (4,636) = 1.575, p= .179 and students' equitable outcomes F (4, 636) = 1.038, p=.387on basis of students' father's occupation.

$H_{o9.}$ There is no significant difference in students' equitable access, participation and outcomes on mother's occupation basis

Table 13
Independent sample t-Test comparing access, participation and outcomes on students' mother's occupation basis

Equity variables	Mothers' occupation	N	Mean	SD	*t*	*Df*	*P*
Access	Housewife	566	47.650	6.84192	3.136	638	.002
	Professional job	74	44.9865	7.09909			
Participation	Housewife	566	203.7143	20.44302	.243	638	.808
	Professional job	74	203.0961	21.45268			
Outcomes	Housewife	566	45.8428	6.31405	1.506	638	.133
	Professional job	74	44.6622	6.54443			

Table 13 showed that there was significant difference in students' equitable access to resources on basis of mother's occupation, such that students whose mother were housewife (M = 47.65, SD= 6.84) reported greater equitable access to resources than students whose mother were professionals (M = 44.98, SD= 7.09), t (638) = 3.136, p < .05. There was no significant difference in students' equitable participation between students, whose mother were a housewife (M = 203.71, SD = 20.44) and whose mothers were professionals (M = 203.09, SD = 21.45), t(638) =.243, p= .808. There was no significant difference in students' equitable educational outcomes between students, whose mother were a housewife (M = 45.84, SD=6.31) and whose mothers were professionals (M = 44.66, SD=6.54), t (638) = 1.506, p= .133.

Discussion

Equity is crucial factor for educational participation, which manifests itself in the educational outcomes of students. The study concluded that higher education in Pakistan had been experiencing inequitable education to an unavoidable extent. The percentage of equity in higher education stood at about 50% with lots of room for improvement. A noticeable percentage of students (about 25%) experienced inequitable access to resources. About 34% of the students particularly reflected inequity of material resources for them. Also a visible percentage of students, i.e. 25% of students observed/ experienced inequity in educational participation, where greatest percentage of inequities, i.e. about 31% had been found in classroom practices by the teachers. Thus, creating equitable teaching learning environment was found out as a weak area in our higher education institutions, requiring a lot of room for improvement. Earlier, Sayed & Ahmad (2015) also highlighted the need to bring up the quality of teachers to engage them effectively and efficiently into diverse contexts of teaching-learning process.

A prominent percentage of students (about 24%) of students experienced inequity of educational outcomes, with a greater percentage of inequities (about 35%) on broader educational outcomes. A point of attention in findings related to educational outcomes was that the percentage on equity of individual educational outcomes came out as quite satisfactory, i.e. 64%, which, however, might be attributed to students' response on self-report items on individual outcomes; as at the same time, picturing about broader equitable educational outcomes, the percentage of equity fall down to 36%.The results of the study came in accordance to the international comparisons on equity indicators by Gorard and Smith (2010), who also gave evidence of greater inequities on part of teachers' practices and behaviors. Recently, Halai and Durrani (2017) also found evidences of educational inequities in Sindh, Pakistan. Their findings highlighted crucial role of teachers in transforming classroom dynamics and redistributing educational opportunities for all for more equitable education in Sindh.

The study also confirmed that students' equitable access to resources and educational participation positively related to students' educational outcomes. The results of the study were in compliance to the equity research by Meuret (2002), that extended understandings of equity to three broader principles, i.e. equality of opportunity, equality of treatment and equality of attainment by Meuret (2002), and the recent equity research trends in England by Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Goldrick, S., & Kerr, K. (2008) and Gorard (2011) who connected equity in micro settings, i.e., equity in access and participation to the equitable educational outcomes for all students in the educational settings.

Students' personal demographics also had significant effect on equity. The study found that students from urban areas were experiencing more equitable education as compared to an undermined group of students from rural side. Earlier studies by Hassan (2014) conducted in Pakistan's public schools on equity also found significant differences in students' expected and experienced equity on basis of locality, mother tongue, fathers' income, education and profession. The results of the current study were also in accordance to Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2015), where Pakistan's report showed significant gaps in educational outcomes across rural and urban area, public and private schools in the Punjab. Mothers' education and occupation also had an effect on whether their siblings experienced equity/ inequity at higher education. Students with lower mother education faced more inequities, and interestingly, more equity was seen among students whose mothers were house wives as compared to working-class mothers. Students from lower-income groups were also found to be falling more prey to inequities in access to resources. A study by OECD (2010) also reported that parents' low education level, those from immigrant families and low socio economic back ground and boys of age 15 had larger chances of low achievement and experiencing inequities in education.

Therefore, the study points towards need of handling social inequalities within the educational system by providing equitable environment to all the students, extending from fair access to educational resources, equitable participation and equitable outcomes. In countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, academic inequalities were well managed by coping with social inequalities instead of mega educational reforms (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993).In this regard, educational institutions need to strive to inculcate some basic level of competencies in each and every learner to transform them into a competent citizen of the society (Gorard, & Smith, 2004, 2010).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded and highlighted the inadequacy of the higher education system in imparting equitable education for the students in higher education institutions in the Punjab. Meanwhile it also confirmed the link between equitable access to resources, equitable educational participation and educational outcomes for the students.

There is a need to establish a fair, equitable and bias-free system, in which teachers keep equally high expectations from every student, regardless of the personal abilities, treat them fairly, in or out of the class, and keep away the biases in awarding marks in the examinations. It is suggested that concrete steps should be taken by the university bodies to foster educational equity for students so that each and every learner at higher education becomes capable of upward social mobility and contribute to the economic development of the country. Special emphasis should be given to improve the quality of teaching-learning at

universities. There is a need that higher education may be developed such that the unprivileged groups are catered. Thus, serious and calculated reforms at the institutional level are required to make educational institutions a better equitable place for students, ultimately leading towards establishment of a just and fair society in our country.

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