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Achieving Access and Equity in Education: An Analysis of Higher Education Reforms in Pakistan

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This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Abstract

In the past two decades, the Government of Pakistan has significantly invested in higher education (HE) to bring structural reforms in funding, governance, and quality assurance mechanisms. Their overarching mission has been to fuel national socioeconomic development by ensuring equal access to HE. Given this, the present study aimed to address the following research question: To what extent have current HE reforms in Pakistan enabled equitable access to HE? To address this question, this study drew from a social justice-centered framework to track trends in HE access that is, broadly and based on socio-economic status, gender, urbanicity/rurality, and region/province. Using secondary data from diverse sources including the HEC, Academy of Education Planning and Management, and the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, we conducted descriptive longitudinal analyses. Findings underscore that the system has failed to provide equal access to HE in several ways and discuss some possibilities for policymakers in equalizing the opportunities.

Keywords*:* access to education, equity, higher education reforms, social justice, Pakistan

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) in Pakistan has been largely neglected by relevant authorities since the establishment of the country in 1947. At the beginning of the new millennium, just two percent of university-age students enrolled in higher education institutes (Hayward, 2009). In 2002, however, the Government of Pakistan initiated major higher education reforms by establishing a higher education commission (HEC). The HEC is the Government of Pakistan's statutory regulatory body, which has been established under the *Higher Education Commission Ordinance, 2002,* with the mission to "Facilitate Institutes of Higher Learning to serve as Engine of Socio-Economic Development of Pakistan" (HEC, Pakistan, 2017, p. 2). The higher education reform initiatives include increasing access to higher education by establishing

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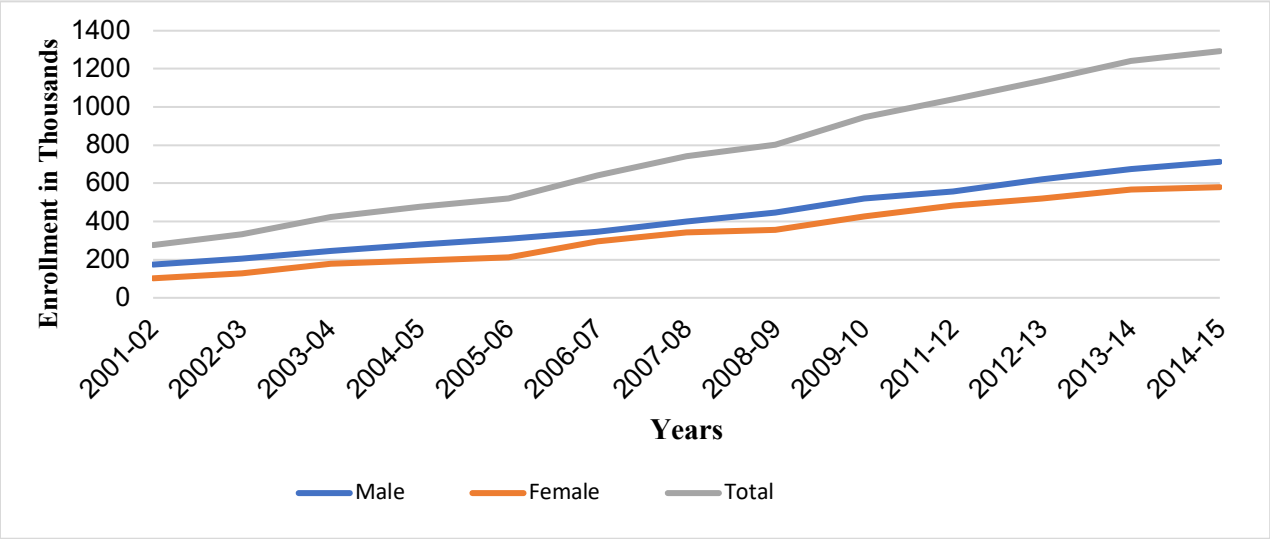
new campuses, offering targeted tuition waivers and scholarships, and improving quality education through applied research and the use of technology. These initiatives caused enrollment in higher education to leap from 2% to 12.6% from 2003 to 2021 and there were some observed enhancements in quality as well (UNESCO, 2021). Figure 1 (below) shows the growth of student enrollment (male, female, and total) in the HE institutions of Pakistan, from 2001-02 to 2014-15.

Figure 1

Higher Education Enrollment by Total and Gender



Note. Data extracted from HEC, Pakistan Universities Statistics (www.hec.gov.pk). The graphs in Figure 1 show increasing enrollment (in thousands) in HE from the year 2001 to 2015.

Despite that, we are concerned about persistent challenges in Pakistan related to access and equity. More specifically, leading into this study we have reason to expect disparities in higher education access based on demographics and geography, such as rural-urban, gender, and socio-economic factors.

Overview of the Problem

Enrollment in Higher Education (HE) in Pakistan has rapidly expanded in the last two decades. However, the expansion of higher education does not necessarily translate into expanded opportunities for the most disadvantaged populations (Buckner, 2017; McCowan, 2016). In Pakistan, a key issue appears to be geographical as universities/colleges are primarily located in big cities. In Karachi, 21% of universities, in Lahore, 17%, and in Islamabad 11%. The geographic location tends to encompass the upper- and middle-class segments of the population. The country's rural and low-income population is still lagging in its access to higher education. According to the National Education Policy 2017 (Ministry of Education [MoE], Pakistan, 2017), out of Pakistan's 120 districts, more than half (65) do not have college campuses. The enrollment rates of higher education are also increasing in big cities and urban areas because of the increase in private universities. Beyond access, there are also substantial differences in public versus private universities/institutes related to quality and access to the prestigious job market (Buckner, 2017). Within the private sector, some institutions are for-profit universities or degree-awarding institutions (DAIs), and others are philanthropic universities (Halai, 2013). For-profit private universities charge higher fees and leave their doors open for all who have sufficient financial resources. Meanwhile, philanthropic universities are located in big cities and have high standards of entrance, and accordingly, their doors for low-income people have too often been shut (Khalid, 2006). Moreover, no progress was observed even in the post-COVID-19 situation because of the digital divide, lack of institutional support, and online learning management system. This situation also exacerbated the challenges faced by low-income students. Consequently, the impact of for-profit HE institutes is still significant in intensifying the disparity (Jamil & Muschert, 2024; Iqbal et al., 2022).

Commitment from the National Government

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2009 has emphasized equitable access to higher education for sustainable development and transforming the vision of a "knowledge-based economy" into reality (MoE, Pakistan, 2009, p. 55). Currently, the youth population of Pakistan is 63% and growing, which means the nation will need to create more access to higher education for sustainable development. Pakistan has a national commitment to equal access to higher education. As cited by the NEP 2017 (MoE, Pakistan, 2017), "according to the constitution of Pakistan, Article 37 C Chapter II, Principle of Policy, the state Shall make technical and professional education generally available and higher education equally accessible to all based on merit" (p. 80).

The government of Pakistan has also developed Pakistan Vision 2025, which has six pillars. The first pillar is *Putting People First*, which envisages significant investment in human resources by offering higher education to the age of 18-23 years cohort (MoE, Pakistan, 2017). The official commitment is to increase the gross enrollment of higher education by up to 25% by 2025. Also, the government of Pakistan has an international commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where SDG 4.3. focuses on higher education as "By 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and territory education, including university." The government of Pakistan included that commitment in the national education Policy 2009 and 2017 (MoE, Pakistan, 2017).

Conceptual Framework: A Distributive Social Justice-Focused Perspective

The present study is framed by a social justice perspective and operates with practical intent, aiming to determine whether and to what extent the Pakistani government has been successful in achieving its stated goal to ensure equal access to higher education (HE). A social justice-centered perspective is fitting given its ultimate emphasis on the equal and full participation of all groups in education (Hackman, 2005; Lynch & Baker, 2005). Such a perspective accordingly also is focused on the enhancement of and support for human agency and draws attention and scrutiny toward power, structures, and privileges that can serve to create or maintain (or ameliorate) social inequalities (Hackman, 2005).

As have many others (e.g., see Dzimbiri & Malin, 2023; Fraser, 2020; Smith, 2018; Lynch & Baker, 2005), we recognize the need to center and closely examine issues of social justice in higher education. One can observe large and persistent inequalities in the field of higher education across many international contexts, and the Pakistani context is not an exception. In fact, education systems have long been criticized for their reproduction or even magnification of power and inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This is problematic, as education systems right from the early stage to higher education have a pivotal role to play in creating a modern, fair, humanizing society (Prasad, 2020). Accordingly, a nation's education system and its education policy form integral parts of its social order (Prasad, 2020).

Though social justice is a broad and contested term, scholars agree social justice requires social arrangements that enable individuals to participate fully and equally in their contexts (see Gewirtz, 1998; Tan, 2020). Achieving this goal thus entails the dismantling of "institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2007, p. 2). Generally, these obstacles are seen as taking three main forms, which most seem to agree are intertwined: issues of distribution, recognition, and representation (Francis et al., 2017; Fraser, 2003). The present study is primarily focused on distributive aspects of social justice, which are concerned with how goods are distributed within Pakistani society. For example, as applied to higher education, an emphasis on distribution at the macro level might lead one to look (as we do, in this study) at who is enrolling in what types of institutions, and examining these patterns by gender, race, social class, geography, and so on. We particularly examine, at a macro level, whether or not participatory parity (Fraser, 2003) is evident in Pakistani higher education, and we examine the nature/direction of trends in participation. In taking this focus we acknowledge we are not able to address other key aspects of social justice (see Fraser, 2020; Gewirtz, 1998 for further discussion); accordingly, we recommend that future study to complement this one—including, for example, attention toward the form of curriculum and the quality and nature of instruction at different institutions.

One of the fundamental purposes of education is to support individuals' ability to be socially mobile, and another is to support nations' sustainable development. Achieving these interrelated goals requires equitable access to high-quality education for all, which in many contexts may require elevated financial as well as specific emphasis on marginalized areas and populations (Altbach et al., 2009). Geography and unequal distribution of wealth and resources all contribute to the disadvantage of certain population groups. Providing higher education to all sectors of a nation's population means confronting social inequalities which are deeply rooted in history, culture, and economic structure that influence an

individual's ability to compete (Altbach et al., 2009). Given this perspective, it is considered fair and just to treat different people in different ways (e.g. in the admission process) based on their specific needs (McCowan, 2016).

This necessity appears to be recognized as formal policy in Pakistan; The National Education Policy Pakistan 2009, for example, has set a vision of an egalitarian approach, emphasizing equitable access to higher education for sustainable development (MoE, Pakistan, 2009).

As previously noted, we are uncertain of the extent to which such policies have indeed been fostering such change. Although access to higher education in Pakistan is increasing, our primary concern is that its growth has been uneven and, potentially, inequitable. In this paper, we will thus analyze equity to access higher education to different groups as,

> The constitution of Pakistan sets out egalitarian views of education based on the values responding to the requirements of economic growth. Article 38 (d) of the Constitution binds the government to instill moral values and offer equitable education to all citizens without discriminating between caste, gender, creed, and race. (MoE, Pakistan 2009, p.16)

Thus, based on this distributive social justice-centered perspective, our research will unpack the structural differences in the higher education system and inequality based on different available resources, varied geopolitical conditions, different socio-economic, ethnicity, gender, and cultural factors, which barricade certain segments of society to unequal conditions of access to higher education in Pakistan. Such a perspective is compatible with our use of secondary data from varied sources, as we seek to identify and analyze disparities and inequalities in HE access and participation. In what follows, we discuss the historical background of higher education in Pakistan and review literature that can partially illuminate current higher education trends and describe access patterns and issues. This review sets up the present study, which examines access to higher education for different groups of people based on the following primary research question: *To what extent have current HE reforms in Pakistan enabled equitable access to HE?* In addressing this question, we particularly attend to equity of access in relation to region, context (i.e., urban, rural), sex (male, female), and publicness (public, private). The final section of the paper discusses the findings and offers suggestions for moving forward.

Literature Review

Historical Background of Higher Education in Pakistan

Pakistan is the world's fifth-largest country, having a total estimated population of 220 million (World Bank, 2019). The country is divided into several provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and federally administered territories (Islamabad capital territories, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit Baltistan). Pakistan was established in 1947; before its establishment, the regions that comprised Pakistan were part of undivided India under British rule. The colonial period saw some progress in education, but that progress was limited to the current part of India and rarely included Pakistan. Regions which are part of current present-day Pakistan were comparatively backward in education and other social indicators (Bengali, 1999). To make matters worse, the newly established country faced insurmountable economic challenges due to a lack of financial resources—a situation that deteriorated any hope of educational progress (Khalid, 2006). Initial educational planning begins in the 1950s, was largely school-centric and its purpose was to enhance mass literacy to achieve the target of basic reading, writing, and numeracy (Bengali, 1999). During the colonial period, Pakistan did not have a system of colleges and universities, which meant any higher education was completed mainly through post-secondary colleges—also known as degree colleges (Bengali, 1999: Hayward, 2009).

Around the time of independence, there was only one university in the newly created Pakistan, the University of Punjab. Later, a few more public and private universities were added, but they retained a colonial standard. The cost of attending universities was so high that enrollment was limited to the bureaucratic and elite classes (Rahman, 2004). The first serious effort toward building a better system of Pakistani higher education was taken up in 1959. The result was a report entitled the “First Commission on Education,” which is viewed by many as a milestone for Pakistani higher education and as paving the way for the establishment of the University Grant Commission (UGC) by the federal government (Mahmood et al., 2015). At the same time, Pakistan’s economy took off and new industries were established. Consequently, the prevailing education system was unable to provide sufficient skilled labor and Pakistani leaders realized the country needed skilled human resources and worked to open agro-industrial and engineering universities (Mills, 2009).

As Pakistan's economy took off in the 1960s, it made some laudable early efforts toward strengthening higher education in Pakistan to produce skilled human resources to meet the industrial needs. Nevertheless, a political commitment to structurally reform higher education was missing (Mahmood et al., 2015). The former UGC, established in 1974, was an inherited institution of the colonial period, working to allocate funds to universities and resolve their financial challenges. It was more politically influenced and bureaucratic in nature, where universities were encountering three layers of bureaucracy including provincial bureaucracy, the federal bureaucracy, and UGC bureaucracy. The UGC observed that the standard of higher education was declining, and the rate of access to higher education was also stagnant. In order to meet the challenges of the 21st century, the country's leaders believed Pakistan needed to invest more in human resources and that it was necessary to abolish the UGC because of its ineffectiveness (Parveen et al., 2011).

In contrast to the UGC, the HEC (initiated in 2002) is more autonomous and represents a powerful national body whose chairman is required to report only to the prime minister of Pakistan. HEC's mission is to facilitate the government toward the growth of economic activity for sustainable development by adding more highly learned and skilled human capital to the system (HEC, Pakistan, 2017). In addition, the purpose of establishing the HEC was also to transform the dream of a knowledge-based economy into reality by widening access to higher education (HEC, Pakistan, 2017).

In 2000, Pakistan's higher education enrollment rate for the cohort of 17-23-year-olds was only 2.2%, which is quite low when compared to neighboring India's 7% and Malaysia's 11% (MoE, Pakistan, 2009). According to the NEP 2017 (MoE, Pakistan, 2017), the twelve-year rate of enrollment jumped to 10% by 2013, but it remains behind neighboring countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. In addition, the current growing accessibility is also skewed. This skewed growth can be a big challenge to inclusive economic growth and the sustainable development of the country (MoE, Pakistan, 2017).

Inequality in Access

Pakistan's education pyramid has been characterized by low, narrow, uneven, and weak infrastructure, which includes low access and larger disparities in access and quality based on different regions and social groups (World Bank, 2006). Within this context, higher education is unsurprisingly showing a similar pattern. Enhancing equitable access to quality higher education is the first strategic mission of the HEC, as expressed in "Vision 2025," with a target set to accelerate higher education access to 30% of the population (HEC, Pakistan, 2017). Due to a worsening political and economic crisis since 2008 and inefficient resource allocation, higher education has missed its targets and is unlikely to achieve a 30% enrollment increase by 2025 (Hayward, 2009). With the increasing demand for higher education and the government's inefficiency to meet it, on the other hand, there has been considerable growth observed in private universities (Halai, 2013). A key issue is that these universities are mainly offering services in big cities like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Meanwhile, a large portion of the Pakistani population resides in rural areas and is unable to access quality higher education. The cost of living in big cities is substantially higher than in rural areas, which barricades the rural population to settle there for HE. The urban population still has the advantages of location, and less deprivation compared to rural areas (Ejaz & Mallawaarachchi, 2023).

Growth of Private Universities

The growth of the private sector in higher education has been a remarkable development in the last four decades (Buckner, 2017). Altbach (2013) connected this rising trend in the private sector worldwide with an increasing demand for higher education and the overcrowding of public universities. These private universities typically run through business models. A chief rationale behind allowing the private sector in higher education was that some national leaders believed the Pakistani government was incompetent, whereas private industries had plenty of resources to support the development of higher education (Niazi & Mace, 2006). The NEP (MoE, Pakistan, 2009) also emphasized the role of the private sector in higher education and believed the private sector could supplement resources with the government for building future human resources. Halai (2013) noted that the government of Pakistan rethought the policy of state-run education in the 1980s because the demand for higher education in the country was high, and the state could accommodate only 2.6% of the total requirement. This situation compelled the government to allow private sector involvement in higher education. As per HEC, Pakistan (2020) data currently, private sector universities accommodate more than a quarter of overall university enrollment in Pakistan.

Skeptics of privatization raise serious concerns related to the increasing number of private universities in Pakistan. According to Khalid (2006) and Hui and Murtaza (2021), the self-financed schemes in higher education have adversely

affected students' access, which is slowly turning higher education into a class-based commodity. Most private universities operate in big cities, and tuition fees are the main source of their revenue (Khalid, 2006). The average tuition fees of these universities are 1000 USD to 2000 USD per semester, compared to 200 USD in public sector universities. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2018), the per capita income of the country is only USD 1641. The big difference between tuition fees and income narrows the opportunity for lower-middle-class and poor people to attend these universities.

Rural vs. Urban Divide

Pakistan's higher education reform agenda also includes increasing accessibility in rural areas. However, current reforms still fail to reduce the rural vs. urban gap in access to higher education. As Saeed and Fatima (2015) describe, rural areas (compared to urban areas) have limited access to educational institutions, particularly in higher educational institutes. Their study shows a huge inequality between rural and urban populations, both in terms of access to education and completion rate. The education disparity in the Sindh province of Pakistan is quite alarming, where 61% percent of the population in rural areas is illiterate compared to 29% in urban Sindh. Likewise, the graduation rate in higher education in rural Sindh is three percent, as compared to 13% in urban Sindh. HEC acknowledged this disparity and opened new universities and campuses in all regions which have to some extent increased the participation rate of students from low-income families and women in higher education (HEC, Pakistan, 2017). Despite these efforts, there remain issues of ensuring qualified faculty and better infrastructure in these regions.

Other than geography, access to education in Pakistan has enormously varied based on the different factors, which include class, gender, and other socio-economic factors, as described next.

Poverty and Income

In developing countries, children from well-off families more easily end up getting a higher education than low-income families, which translates to these students getting better jobs and higher-class positions in society (Khalid, 2006; Mishra, 2019). The analysis and findings section of the study highlights how students from high-poverty zones or regions struggle to access higher education. The current market-driven growth in the economy and lack of government social interventions create a vicious poverty cycle for the students of low-income families. The lack of resources and opportunities restricts these students from getting a better education at the school level, which leads to a barricade for them to compete for admission to the next level (i.e., in higher education institutions). Tarar (2006) argued that globalization and neoliberalism have also affected Pakistan's system of higher education. That comes with high academic standards, meritocracy, standardized admission tests, and high fees, all of which are factors that limit the opportunities for disadvantaged students to access higher education.

Gender-inequality

Overall, women's participation in higher education in Pakistan has improved. The current political environment is also favorable toward continued gains in this area, including programs providing specific financial aid and opportunities for women (Malik & Courtney, 2011). It was culturally unfavorable for women to go beyond their home city, especially to attend a college or university (Parveen et al., 2011). In 2001, 36% of those attending higher education were women, and by 2014 the percentage had increased to 47% (Pakistan Institutes of Education, 2023). Though the proportion of women has increased in teaching positions, women are still behind in administrative roles (Batool et al., 2013). A challenging aspect is that, like in other developing countries, female deprivation from higher education is mainly in rural areas and is a common occurrence. Female education in Pakistan is intricate and deeply rooted in the socio-economic and cultural background of the country; in part because of high poverty rates in rural areas, peoples' attitudes and structural constraints toward women's higher education remain unchanged, as women HE costs more and contributes less in family wealth (Ilie et al., 2021; Malik & Courtney, 2011). The requirement of per-capita investment in female education is higher in Pakistan because of cultural restrictions. In addition, there is also a gender-based division of labor (Khalid, 2006). In Pakistan, women mostly remain at home and take care of family matters after completing higher education. These practices also stunt women's ability to pursue higher education. Within women, there is another form of segregation. Most women faculty and students come from the elite class, while women from the marginalized class often fall short in the competition (Batool et al., 2013: Malik & Courtney, 2011).

There is a lack of a systematic plan and a somewhat promising but flawed approach to fixing higher education. According to Hoodbhoy (2009) and Gilani (2023), it is common flawed wisdom to fix higher education through finance

and centralized bureaucracy. Before the opening of the university, he argued that student access and faculty availability should be rationalized. Further, he argued that an enormous increase in funding marginally improved quality and access in some parts of the country, but more still needs to be done.

Methodology

As mentioned above our research method draws on and analyzes secondary data. The secondary data analysis method is an empirical exercise that uses the same principles and approach as the analysis of primary research data (Johnson, 2017). Chudgar and Lubschei (2016) elaborated that large-scale secondary data has excellent potential to enable descriptive analysis in policy research. Further, analyzing these data in relation to distributive features, using a social justice-centric perspective, enhances our understanding of HE inequality trends based on differential context, gender, and ethnicity. It also contributes to suggesting policy changes that could bring about more fairness and equity (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Making use of available existing data sets (detailed below), we generated descriptive analyses to address our research questions.

The data used in this study were extracted from four sources of documents and reports. Our secondary data sources included: (1) HEC statistics, (2) Academy of Education Planning and Management (AEPAM) Pakistan data, (3) Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) data regarding Pakistan Social Living Standard Measurement (PSLM), and (4) the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF). HEC Statistics helped us determine the number of available universities and DAIs in Pakistan and the number of enrolled students based on provinces, regions, gender, and public vs private. The data regarding student enrollment is collected by HEC approximately every year from all higher education institutions. AEPAM Pakistan data also helped in measuring higher education enrollment over the period in different regions. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) collects PSLM data which helped to measure the social living conditions of citizens. Above all, the PPAF data set helped in measuring poverty based on poverty zones.

We integrated these (HEC statistics, AEPAM reports, PSLM survey reports, and PPAF reports) multiple data sets and analyzed data using descriptive statistical methods (e.g., by calculating and reporting percentages and numbers by category and across time). Based on the analyses, we generated tables and graphs. These tables and graphs reveal several key trends in higher education in Pakistan and are interpretable from a social justice-centered perspective. Specifically, this study's results highlight which areas, sectors, and groups get more and fewer benefits from the overall higher education reforms in Pakistan. The descriptive analysis of HEC statistics and AEPAM Pakistan data yield findings related to the number of universities and students' enrollments (in percent and in numbers) in various regions in a given period, which can be found in graphs and tables below the findings section. The analysis of PSLM data sets offers results regarding higher education access to various subgroups based on provinces and regions and can be seen in Table 2. Analyses of PPAF data along with other data sources such as HEC statistics portray the relationship between poverty and higher education access (e.g., see Figures 3 and 4 and Table 1 for depictions of the relationship between poverty zone and citizens' access to HE).

Findings

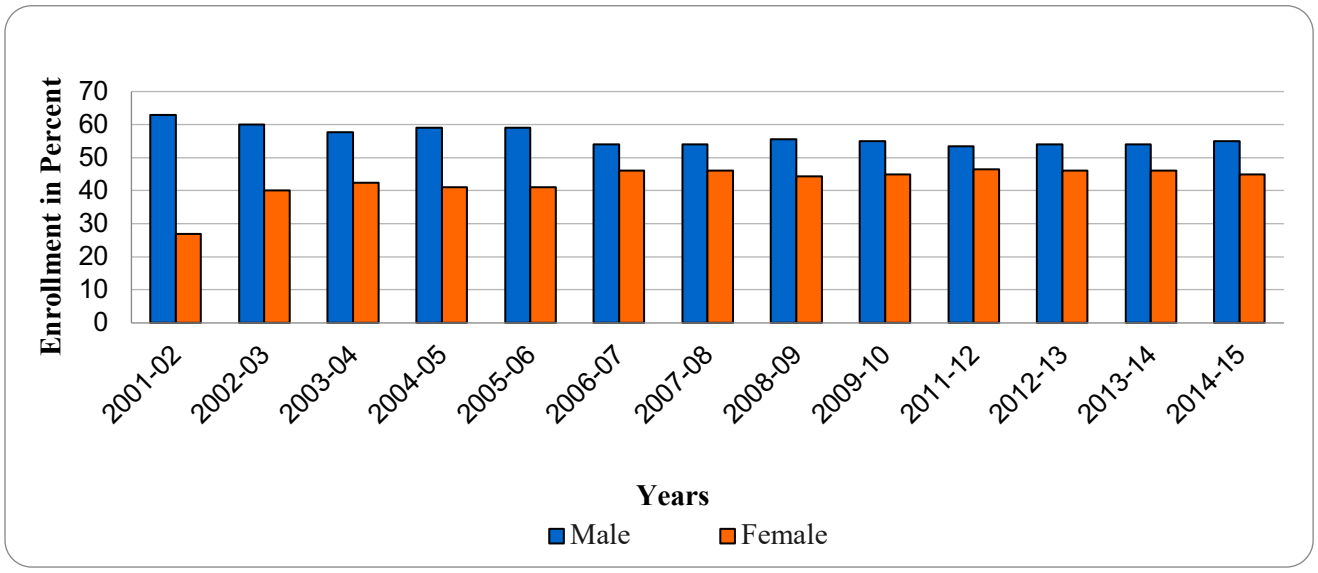
After analyzing the various sources of data mentioned above, we systematically present the results below for the discussion. In the first part, we show the growth of higher education. After that, we have shown how that growth ended up being not equal to the various groups. In this regard, we have added several graphs and tables which clearly bifurcate students' enrollments (access) to higher education institutions based on their geographic locations and demographic characteristics.

Growth in Higher Education Enrollment in Pakistan

Despite having the lowest access to higher education in South Asia, we observed substantial growth in higher education enrollment after the establishment of HEC and the tangible contribution of government funding. The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) recommended an increment of 72% in government funding (i.e., 2.9 to 5 billion) annually. The growth in HE enrollment increased by approximately 500%, from 2001-02 to 2020-21. An important point as given in Figure 2 (below) is that the gap between males and females in higher education is also narrowed. The Female enrollment in 2014-15 increased to 46% compared to 27% in 2001-02 (given in Figure 2).

Figure 2

Enrollment by Gender

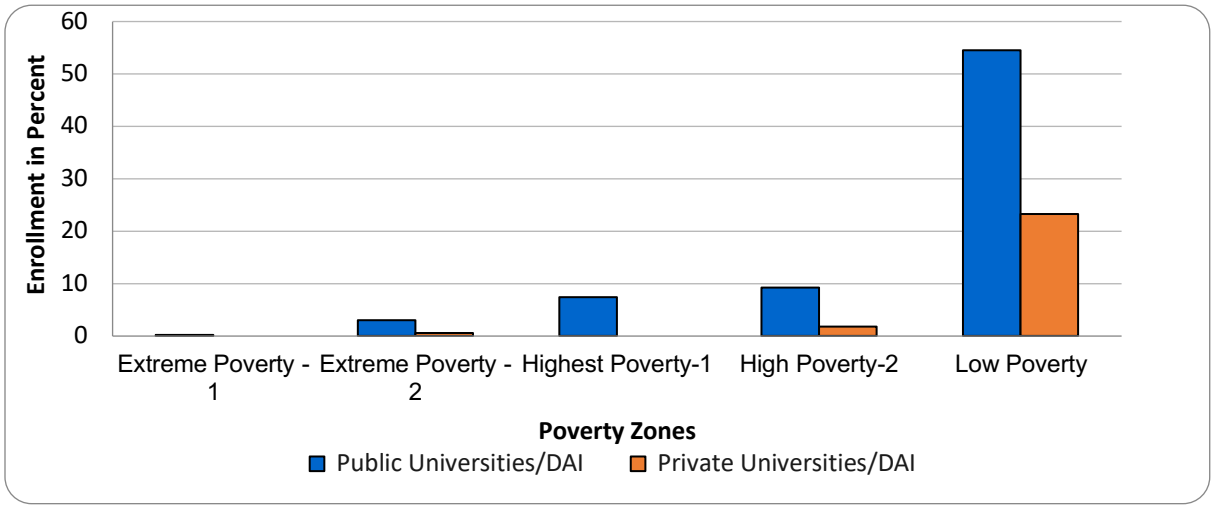


Note. Data extracted from HEC, Pakistan Universities Statistics (www.hec.gov.pk). The graphs in Figure 2 show the percent of enrollment (male vs female) in HE from the year 2001 to 2015.

However, the above growth and narrowing gender gap (given in Figure 2) does not yet paint a picture of broad, robust access to higher education, as the total participation rate to higher education is limited to 12% [Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), 2020]. Moreover, the larger population of the country living in rural areas and high-poverty zones is still lagging, as will be demonstrated as we proceed.

Figure 3

Enrollment Based on Poverty Zones.



Note. Data extracted from PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018); Higher Education Commission Enrollment Statistics 2017-18. The graphs show that the percentage of enrollment increases as the level of poverty decreases.

Inequality Based on Poverty

We looked at the data on higher education while connecting with poverty zones, we found that a large number of universities are located in low-poverty zones As Naveed & Ghaus (2018) divided the country regions based on poverty zones. We have depicted Extreme Poverty Zone I (very left graph in Figure 3 below) areas are the regions that ranked highest in terms of poverty and lowest in terms of social standards. In the same vein, extreme poverty zone 2 is a comparatively less poverty-stricken area than 1. Similarly, as the graph moves from left to right the level of poverty decreases. The low poverty zone (extreme right graph in Figure 3) is considered a developed and urbanized region in terms of social standards and has high scores on the human development index and relatively high literacy rates. Similarly, in Figure 3, as the graph moves from left to right the number of higher education institutes increased (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018).

The higher enrollment in low poverty zones (also sometimes referred to as advantaged regions) is attributable to several factors, including but not limited to better quality of primary and secondary schooling, which accordingly better prepares them for HE; availability of different universities and choices; enhanced career guidance; and enhanced financial support from family and other sources. The share of the extreme poverty-1 population in Pakistan is about 5.6%. In these areas, there is just a single public sector university and no private one (see Table 1), and less than half percent of that population is enrolled in higher education. By contrast, the low poverty zone comprises a population share of 40%, and more than 70% of universities are located in these areas. Similarly (as given in Table 1), as we move from high to low-poverty zones, we can see that the number of available universities increases considerably. Thus, we can estimate that there remain huge disparities in access to higher education as a function of geography and poverty, which are interlinked in Pakistan.

Table 1

The Number of Universities/ DAIs Based on Poverty Zones.

Category in Zones of Poverty	The proportion of poverty based on zones	Population share (in percent)	Number of Universities/DAIs between 2017–18		
			Public	*Private*	*Total*
Extreme Poverty-1	91.2-68.7	5.6	1	0	1
Extreme poverty- 2	68.6-49.3	11.5	11	1	12
High Poverty-1	48.4-34.6	19.3	14	0	14
High Poverty-2	33.6-19.2	23.5	20	2	22
Low poverty	19.3-3.2	40	65	73	138
Total		100	111	76	187

Note. Data extracted from PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018); Higher Education Commission Statistics 2017– 18 (HEC, Pakistan, 2020).

Rural vs. Urban Inequity

Access to higher education based on rurality vs. urbanity also reveals significant differences. First, we can see that private universities in Pakistan are largely located in urban and low-poverty zone areas. Figure 3 above shows that most

private universities that charge fees are located in low-poverty zones, and we interpret this as reflecting their client markets. As per Table 1, the low-poverty area has the highest numbers of universities or DAIs such as 65 public universities and 73 private universities. The number of universities and the percentage of enrollment in extreme poverty zones (mostly in rural areas), by contrast, are infinitesimal (having 0.2% enrollment) as it shows only a single public sector university in that region. Further, as poverty scales decrease the percentage of enrollment increases in public universities, and more so in private universities and DAIs. This situation is very likely to create more reproduction of stratification and inequality in higher education and beyond (e.g., in terms of access to certain types of employment).

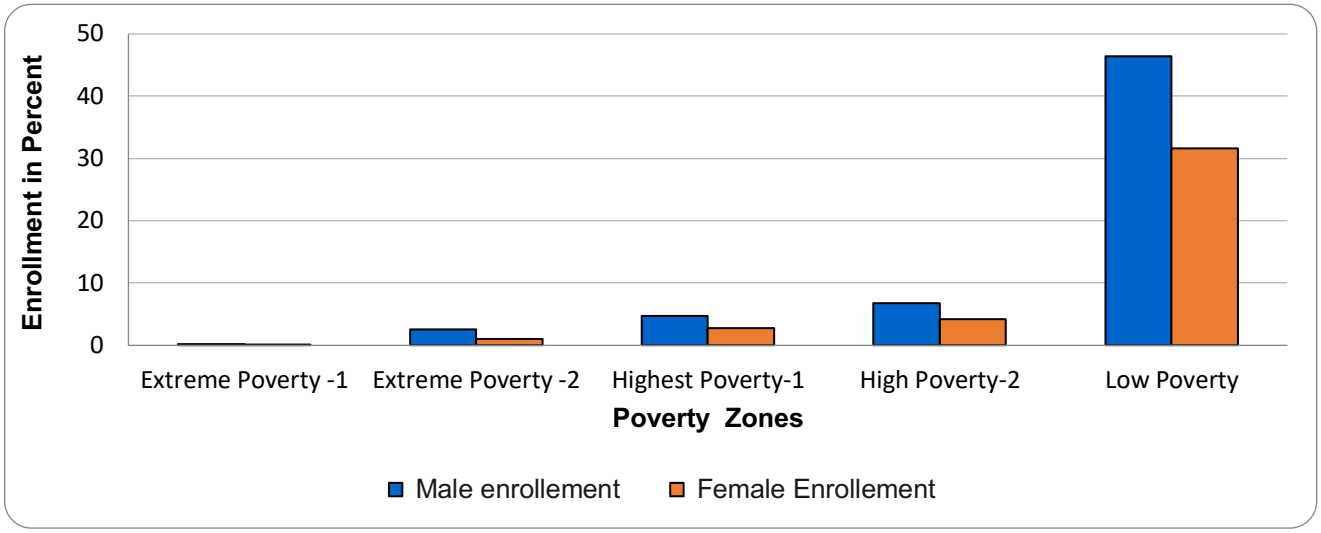
In Pakistan, rural poverty is multidimensional and about 44% of citizens live in poverty (Padda & Hameed, 2018). Citizens experiencing poverty also have low purchasing power, which means it may be difficult or impossible for them to afford HE from private university. Moreover, governments' lower spending in rural areas contributes to create more deprivation to access HE.

Gender-based Inequality

Though female enrollment increased overall after 2000, the increase has been observed only in affluent and developed areas. Figure 4 shows the female enrollment ratio is quite low (0.02% female vs 0.18% male) in extreme poverty. Meanwhile, in the low-poverty zone, female enrollment is 32% compared to 46% male. This alarming data shows the reason for the inadequate availability of facilities and support for female citizens in education poverty-stricken areas of Pakistan. Further, it also reveals that gender disparity is more tied to poverty and low socioeconomic growth.

Figure 4

Enrollment by Gender and Poverty



Note. Data extracted from PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018); Higher Education Commission Enrollment Statistics 2017–18 (HEC, Pakistan, 2020).

Based on the above result, it is evident that female enrollment in HE in Pakistan is skewed according to income and gender. This implies that household characteristics will be key factors in determining future trends toward gender in/equality in HE.

Inequality Based on Regions/Provinces.

If we look at the different regions of Pakistan compared to rural areas, urban areas have more access to higher education. For example, Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT is considered one of the developed areas and has the highest number of university and student enrollments (e.g., 14% enrollment having a population share of .97%: see table 2, below). Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Sindh Urban, and Punjab are also developed/Affluent regions (as per PSLM, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020) that have the second-highest proportion of universities and student enrollment share. Baluchistan and Sindh Rural have the lowest number of proportional enrollments and also a huge disparity among male vs female access

to higher education. Moreover, there are no or negligible private sector universities or degree awarding institutions enrollments in these areas.

Table 2

Enrollment in Universities/DAIs by Sector, Gender, and Provinces/Regions in the Years 2017–18

Provinces /Regions	Population share (in percent)	Public sector		Private sector		Total	Total enrollment (in percent)
		Male	Female	Male	Female		
Punjab	52	189,822	187,218	85779	52337	515,156	45
Sindh (Rural)	12.1	58,780	21,824	0	0	80,604	7
Sindh (Urban)	11.4	48,795	45,054	58648	30,229	182,726	16
KP	15	71,418	26,201	35574	10,082	143,275	12
Baluchistan	5.7	21,873	9,460	484	108	31,925	3
AJK	2	11,368	13,392	1021	1357	27,138	2
GB	0.83	2,160	2,184	0	0	4,344	0.3
ICT	.97	77,768	51,194	20580	13,089	162,631	14
Total	100	481,984	356,527	202086	107,202	1,147,79	100

Note. Data extracted from, Census 2017 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2018); National Educational Management Information System [NEMIS] (AEPAM reports, 2017-18); Higher education commission enrollment statistics 2017–18 (HEC, Pakistan, 2020)

The above table and previous graphs and tables showed that the increasing trend to access HE is more concentrated in urban and developed regions of Pakistan. However, rural and high-poverty areas populations are severely left behind in access. An additional, related challenge for students from low-income backgrounds and rural areas is that these students frequently are deemed as having academic deficiencies in relation to universities' standards and admissions criteria. Some universities offer foundation courses, which are also called remedial education or developmental education (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000), enabling students to overcome such academic and social gaps while living for six months one semester in the environment of the best universities. The selection of students can also be made based on students' talents and with proper consideration of their backgrounds (e.g., poverty).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study and others (e.g., Ilie et al., 2021; McCown, 2016) clearly show continued disparities in higher education access in Pakistan related to region, income, gender, and urbanicity. It is quite possible, perhaps even likely, for inequality to grow alongside HE expansion (Altbach, 2013). However, to delineate policy implications for HE reform, in this study we have tried to present facts and findings related to whether and to what extent this growth in access

to HE in Pakistan has been equitable—i.e., to what extent it has benefited all segments of society. We applied a social justice-centered perspective (see Fraser, 2020; Lynch & Baker, 2005) to examine patterns of higher education growth (i.e., participatory parity). Current data from government-published documents and independent institutes showed substantial growth in higher education access. However, we have found that this growth has not been inclusive. Moreover, this growth does not significantly benefit those segments of the population which have been historically underprivileged. Based on analysis of PSLM (PBS, 2020) and PPAF (Naveed & Ghaus, 2018) data, Pakistan showed enormous inequality in higher education access and enrollments based on class, gender, rurality/urbanity, and poverty zone. As such, its higher education reforms have thus far failed to address these structural issues. This is concerning because a narrow objective of higher education growth without attention to equity and social justice can be expected to produce and reproduce inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

There is also another over-simplified but widely held conclusion regarding the gender gap that is narrowing in access to and enrollment in higher education. On the one hand, the findings of this study showed that gender gaps are decreasing in developed and urban regions. On the other hand, gender-based gaps from the perspectives of poverty and geography (less developed regions) have persisted. It requires affirmative action from the government to reduce these disparities (Batool et al., 2013; Naz & Ashraf, 2020). Our analyses and perspectives also support the argument that rising private sector universities create more disparities in HE access due to their high tuition cost and selective approach to admission (e.g., see Khalid, 2006). Government can ensure access for all through structural reforms in higher education with most new public sector universities being opened in rural areas and high-poverty zones. These universities should also be endowed with ample human resources and financing. For private sector universities, there should be regulations from Higher Education Commission (HEC), and they should create more opportunities through scholarships, financial support, and an inclusive environment for disadvantaged regions students.

Accordingly, and based on the preceding findings, we illustrated and informed the government and policymakers to increase higher education enrollment from the current level to 15% by 2025 (as mentioned in HEC Pakistan, 2017) can only be possible through inclusiveness – all groups of the population. In order to have equitable access, special focus should be given to those who are historically underprivileged. Pakistan has launched several scholarships and a financial aid program for needy students such as HEC undergraduate scholarship programs (HEC Pakistan, 2021). These are laudable efforts, but scholarships should be more targeted (focus on low-enrolled areas) and integrated with other dimensions (e.g., poverty, gender, and academic deficiencies) which present obstacles in attaining education.

One key limitation of this study is that it has focused solely on macro-level aspects of HE access. There are several other factors at micro- or meso- levels that can also create or contribute to inequality in HE in Pakistan. For example, there are cultural barriers and expectations for women to stay at home. Also, in some cases the HE institutes' entrance policies and cultures implicitly favor some groups and exclude minorities and others, for instance based on their faith, past education, and grades. The present study also has focused on HE and not on vocational education. In contrast to schools and higher education, vocational education has not yet captured the attention of government and private providers despite of its' increasing demand in the future (Bano et al., 2022). As university-based higher education for all youth is not easily achievable in Pakistan, in this regard, the higher education vision 2025 (HEC, Pakistan, 2017) clearly demonstrates the importance of skill-based community colleges to offer post-secondary education at the doorsteps of the students. The purpose is to grow technologically competent, highly skilled workers, who meet the job requirements of the 21st century. HEC also proposed a two-year community college education to broadly focus on skill development for the youth. These colleges can be affiliated with top-ranked universities in Pakistan and operate primarily in rural and poverty-stricken areas. HEC should ensure the quality level of those colleges is on par with other higher education institutes and ensure the students at these colleges will not be discriminated against as they work to secure jobs. This initiative will reduce the obstacles to achieving higher (or post-secondary) education for students from far-flung and disadvantaged areas. We recommend additional research on these and other features related to HE and vocational education in/equity in Pakistan.

Finally, higher education is an under-researched area in Pakistan that needs more evidence-based research into whether and how it would be helpful to enhance higher education access (and subsequent success) for disadvantaged students. This study has future implications for both future researchers and policymakers to understand and explain HE access and equity in a more nuanced way and come up with equity-based reforms which can work for every segment of the population.

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