

Understanding unequal pathways towards higher education in a developing context: focusing on access and learning (0307)

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## Paper

### 1. Background

Recent global trends in higher education access are indicative of rapid growth and enduring inequalities, with many low-income countries showing little to no improvement for the poorest (Ilie & Rose, forthcoming; Marginson, 2016). These trends are prefaced by successes for primary education, whereby a focus of the Millennium Development Goals on universal primary access galvanised efforts and resulted in world-wide improvements. However, the remaining gaps in the quality of primary education, as well as in the learning outcomes of children at an early age continue to be translated into enduring higher education access gaps. Indeed, there is substantial evidence from high-income countries (e.g. Chowdry et al, 2013) that early learning strongly influences young people's subsequent chances of higher education access. Recent evidence from a wide range of developing countries (Ilie & Rose, forthcoming) also highlights that the inequalities in higher education access may be traced back to both secondary and primary school access gaps. Drawing on panel data, this latter evidence points to important time trends, but cannot explore life-course trajectories towards higher education in the absence of longitudinal data, which is seen as crucial for a better understanding of the development of educational access inequalities worldwide.

### 2. Paper Aims

Within this context, this current paper makes use of a unique resource, the Young Lives study (2016) to address the question of the influence of learning during primary and secondary school on higher education access chances. We explore the relationship between early childhood conditions (including household wealth, parental characteristics, and children's access to schooling) and their subsequent levels of learning in order to understand what enables children to progress through educational systems, and to ultimately access higher education.

### 3. Methodology

To address our research aims, we make use of data from the *Young Lives* study (2016), a longitudinal exploration of the educational and life experiences of young people in four countries: Ethiopia, India (the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam, that provides rich qualitative and quantitative data on a variety of characteristics and outcomes for approximately 1,000 children in each of the four countries. Born in 1994, these children have participated in four survey waves, at the ages of 8, 12, 15, and 19, and were therefore old enough at the final wave to have potentially entered higher education in their respective country. We perform a series of ordinary-least-squares and logistic regression analyses using the quantitative data, to estimate the relationships between access to higher education (our outcome of interest) and learning at each of the different earlier ages, while controlling for a set of individual and household characteristics.

#### 4. Results and Implications

Our preliminary results reveal high variability in the levels of higher education access between the four countries, from a minimum of 14% of the cohort in Ethiopia, to over 40% in Peru, when higher education is defined most inclusively. Consistent with previous evidence (e.g. Ilie & Rose, forthcoming) we also find strong evidence of large wealth-driven inequalities in higher education access opportunities, with the richest 20% of young people at least 3 times more likely than their poorest peers to be enrolled in higher education aged 19.

We find that controlling for all household and individual characteristics above, not being in school at age 8 is linked to chances of higher education access that are not significantly different from zero in Peru and Vietnam. This suggests, as expected, that early non-enrolment in systems where over-age initial access is not pervasive can lead to drastically reduced educational opportunities later on. In Ethiopia, where the issue of over-age access to schooling is more common, it is school attendance at age 12 that appears to be the key transition. In India, for a cohort attending primary schooling before policies of automatic grade progression were implemented, none of the three ages in the survey represent cut-offs on the pathway to higher education, suggesting a potentially more permeable system.

For those children who attend school at the above key transition points, and focusing on our research aims, our results show that in all four country-cohorts, the influence of childhood learning (age 8) for later higher education access chances is second only to being in the richest quintile when controlling for parental characteristics and schooling access, and equally important for both boys and girls.

Later in the participants' life course, learning at even basic levels in early adolescence (age 12) is correlated to higher education access independently of prior learning. However, it is only in India where age 12 learning matters for higher education access over and above childhood learning, even when controlling for children's school access, and household characteristics. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, Peru, and Vietnam, it is the age 15 learning levels that continue to have an additional effect on their chances of higher education access, after all their prior learning has been taken into account.

The preliminary evidence presented here suggests that efforts addressing global higher education inequalities must address the entire educational trajectory, from the earliest point possible. Achieving universal primary school completion was the first step, but it must be followed closely by a marked improvement in the standard of learning with which children leave primary school. Only then can later school access and learning gaps begin to be tackled and higher education inequalities be reduced. This is a long-term endeavour that requires careful monitoring. For this latter purpose, the field requires longitudinal data of the kind we have analysed in this paper, but with even larger samples, data that reports on good quality and comparable measures of early life conditions and also allows for flexibility so as to capture each country's particular educational system.

#### 5. References

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