Measuring Higher Education Access: Purpose and Context

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Abstract
Gross enrollment ratio (GER) is a widely used indicator to measure access to education. Recently, another indicator called eligible enrollment ratio (EER) was introduced. This article attempts to compare GER and EER and their utility in assessing the progress of higher education in India. This article argues that GER is more likely to remain the most appropriate indicator for measuring access to higher education.

The share of the population getting access to higher education (HE) and joining the workforce with higher education qualifications is an important indicator of the quality of labor and of countries' potential for social and economic development. Planners and policy makers rely on indicators to assess progress, set targets for future expansion of the HE sector, and focus on particular social groups to ensure equity across an expanding system. Gross enrollment ratio (GER) is a widely used indicator to measure access to HE. Recently, though, Pankaj Mittal and Bhushan Patwardhan (_IHE, 2020, Fall Issue # 104_) argued that another measure, called eligible enrollment ratio (EER), is a more realistic indicator for measuring access to HE, especially for economies such as India's. This article attempts to contribute to the debate by comparing the merits and demerits of GER and EER.

Indicators of Access to Higher Education
Enrollment ratio (ER) reflects the vital linkage between education and society at large. Gross enrollment ratio (GER), net intake rate (NIR), net enrollment rate (NER), and gross intake ratio (GIR) are some of the main indicators relied upon when making comparisons between educational systems. Not all indicators are suitable for HE. For instance, NER, which calculates the percentage of age-specific enrollment for a given level of education, is rarely used in HE, as total age-specific enrollment is difficult to calculate due to the multiplicity of available entry pathways.

Gross Enrollment Ratio
Among these indicators, GER is widely and globally used as an indicator to measure access to HE. Even the classification of HE into elite, mass, and universal stages (by Martin Trow, in the early 1970s) is based on GER. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, GER represents total enrollment at a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of the age cohort corresponding to that same level of education. Since 18–23 is the age segment of the group enrolled in higher education in India, GER in a given year is calculated as total enrollment in higher education institutions (HEIs), regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total 18–23-year-old population cohort that year.

Eligible Enrollment Ratio

As indicated by Mittal and Patwardhan, EER is calculated as the total enrollment in HE in a given year regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of the age cohort (in the official HE age group) who have attained a secondary qualification (class 12). Thus, applying this additional eligibility criterion simply excludes all those in the age cohort who did not attain a secondary qualification. EER provides vital insights about demand and supply conditions in HE. However, unlike GER, EER can in principle be increased in two different ways. One is by increasing the total enrollment, and the second by reducing the number of members of the qualified age cohort. The second scenario is obviously not progressive. For instance, EER can be high even with a very low level of total enrollment, if the size of the eligible and qualified (12th class pass) age cohort is limited: If 1,000 out of one million college-going age population in a country have passed the secondary school certificate and the total enrollment in HE is 1,000, then EER is 100 percent.

Comparing GER and EER

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"GER vs. EER" appears to be a false debate. As discussed, the purpose of each indicator is different. The comparative advantage that each brings in should not be the rationale for preferring one over another. We need to examine both the purpose for and the context of using an indicator. In the specific context of the knowledge economy, the share of the population acquiring higher education qualifications is crucial information for social and economic planning. Here, GER serves an important purpose, indicating how many college-aged youths are enrolled in HEIs. A high GER means that more are enrolled in colleges and universities. On the contrary, EER, taken independently, is inadequate to provide direction for planners. For instance, a higher EER could be due to a lower number of eligible-age cohorts. So EER is meaningful only in comparison with GER. It is noteworthy that in mature HE systems such as, for instance, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, the gap between GER and EER is minimal. It is due to the progress that these systems have made in universalizing school education.

Mittal and Patwardhan drew our attention to some of the limitations of GER. For instance, including international students when calculating GER is allegedly giving undue advantage to mature HE systems, which attract numerous students from all over the world. There are three more factors impacting GER in emerging economies like India. First, the enrollment of mature students (who are older than the official HE age group). In universalized HE systems such as the United States and the United Kingdom, mature students constitute a substantial share of the total enrollment and are an influential factor in calculating GER. This phenomenon is not significant in some other regions such as Asia and Africa. Second is the duration of undergraduate (UG) programs. Compared to four-year UG degrees such as in the United States, Indian UG degrees take three years, except for technical and professional programs such as engineering and medicine. This has serious implications on GER. Third is the inclusion of all types of postsecondary qualifications when calculating GER. Some postsecondary study programs, which are below the bachelor degree (level 6 of ISCED 2011), should not be considered higher education.

Conclusion

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To conclude, GER and EER indicate two distinctive scenarios of HE enrollment. Therefore, discussing the advantage of the one over the other may not be very helpful. Although EER is an important indicator, taken alone it is of little use for planners of education and economy. If the aim is to envision an inclusive society and a globally competitive economy in a knowledge era, then GER better suits this purpose. Therefore, it is more likely that GER will continue to remain the main indicator to measure access to HE. However, there is immense potential for improving it, to make it globally comparable and fairer for low and lower-middle economies.