



# Admission Policies for Improved Access and Equity in Higher Education in Nigeria: Achievements and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on admission policies for higher education in Nigeria: achievements and challenges. It was predicated on the determination of the achievements and challenges of the practice of existing admission policies for improved access and equity in higher education in a heterogeneous Nigeria. A lot of achievements as well as challenges were discerned to be associated with the admission policies. It was concluded that these policies are measures to achieve equal higher educational opportunity, which does not mean sameness or uniformity, but equal treatment of a heterogeneous country. Hence, the practice is supported, but should be based on the economic principle of positive discrimination.

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## Introduction

The utility derivable from western education has attracted several descriptions; it as an instrument par excellence for national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004); a social demand and an investable social good with immeasurable economic reward (Todaro, 1982), the greatest legacy for the elite (Jhingan, 2008), a social service and poverty alleviation (Enaohwo, 1990). Not surprising, the tertiary education system has initiated and warranted higher researches that have contributed immensely to national development both in sciences and arts; brought about rapid transformation, innovations, and initiation of credible policies that have made social change inevitable and triumphed over major challenges in the polity and economy.

Apart from its imperativeness, the establishment of higher education has always been associated with criticisms over the non-realization of access and equity in higher education due to the heterogeneous character of Nigeria (Abdulrahman-Yusuf, 2012). The gravity of these problems to higher education as witnessed in contemporary times cannot be equated to what it was in the past; when comparatively, the percentage of those seeking for university education was few. Hitherto, with the required O'Level results and the higher school certificate one could gain admission for the chosen course of study into any Nigerian university. Sequel to the phenomenal increase in the number of candidates seeking admission into higher education and the need to improve standard the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) was established in 1978 with the promulgation of Decree 2. This body took over the responsibility of entrance examination for candidates for admission into higher education and adopted admission policies to ameliorate the existing problems of access and equity in the system.

The problems of access and equity into higher education and the lack of adequate capacity of the higher education system to provide the required number of places for candidates who seek admission into them appeared to have continued to pose a serious challenge to the country. In fact, it takes candidates a while to gain admission into the Nigerian university education, while a good number alternatively opt for any course leading to job mismatch in the economy. Some candidates sit for the JAMB examination for years without gaining access into any university, resulting in cheatings or making a wrong choice of course in order to gain admission.

The introduction of the JAMB (UME) could be said to have been accompanied with the admission policy of quota system, which was intended to ensure equity in access of candidates in all the various regions and zones in the country. Although, the quota policy provides attendant merits, its overwhelming demerits invoked other policy reforms that were intended to ameliorate the system. Consequently, the Federal Government came up and adopted the admission policy criteria of 45% for Merit, 35% for Catchment Area and 20% for Education less Privileged States (ELPS) in addition to the direct entry system.

Further, the Federal Government stipulated admission policy ratios for State institutions in the order of 70:30 and 60:40 (which are applicable to polytechnics and universities). These policies were instituted to guide admission processes into Nigerian higher institutions in the spirit of fairness and equal access to education for all. All higher institutions have been directed to adhere strictly to the policy criteria, which must guide their decision making in matters of admission. Nevertheless, it appears that these policy criteria have not

been able to ameliorate the problem of access and equity into higher education in the country.

In view of the scenario portrayed above, this paper focuses on the determination of the achievements and challenges of admission policy criteria for higher education in Nigeria. This is predicated on the assumption that there are achievements derivable from the admission policy criteria as well as its challenges. It is therefore pertinent to address these challenges in the light of the existing practice of access and equity in higher education in the country. The paper adopted the outline below to decipher the facts under investigation:

1. Theoretical frame work;
2. Reforming higher education in the light of admission policy options;
3. Access to higher education as basis of admission policy options;
4. Admission policy options for higher education;
5. The concept of quota system in higher education admission;
6. Implication of admission policy options for higher education; and
7. Strategic perspectives for correcting admission policy.

#### **The theoretical frame work**

The theoretical position of this paper, admission policies for improved access and equity in higher education in Nigeria: achievements and challenges; anchors on the Social Demand Approach (SDA) to manpower planning also known as the Social Objectives Method (SOM) to educational planning. The approach views education as a consumption commodity and the expenditure on it as consumption expenditure rather than an investment. Educational expenditure can therefore be seen as consumption when education like consumption good is seen as possessing an intrinsic need satisfying ability.

The Netherlands Economic Institute precisely summarizes the basic thrust of the Social Demand Approach when it remarks that if a sufficiently qualified citizen stands at the door of any type of school, he must be admitted and it is the responsibility of any appropriate government authority to anticipate his request so that school capacity will be adequate to accommodate him (Vaizey, Sheehame & Leite cited in Owhondah, 2006).

The intrinsic need satisfying ability of the Social Demand Approach is the utility power of education. To the educated, education is provided for all those who are hungry of it to quench their hunger. The hunger for any type or level of education is the desire of it by those who are qualified for it and express their willingness and desire to acquire it. The utility of education is the ability of education to satisfy the desire of the educated. Therefore, when the educated man derives satisfaction from the level of education acquired, it can be said that education at that level possesses utility. In other words, every level of education, including higher education, possesses utility and thus becomes useful to the man who acquires or is acquiring it.

As a result of the fact that usefulness is a relative term, a level of education that may be useful to one person may not be to another. This goes to justify the saying that human desire for education is insatiable. Hence, the utility derivable from any level of educational attainment is relative depending on the man who wants to acquire it. A level of education that can satisfy a household, firm or government want at any particular point in time and place may not satisfy another man's desire for education, everything being equal.

The manpower planning is adopted to fathom an understanding of the admission policy options for higher

institutions in Nigeria. The ability of university education system in Nigeria to effectively address the issue of access of candidates must comply with the tenets of manpower planning. The higher education or university system must develop appropriate admission policies; improve systematically with it in order to effectively produce quality, qualitative and quantitative outputs. Enaohwo (1990), maintains that manpower planning is the process of determining in advance the distribution and utilization of the labour force needed by economic sector, region and industry. Similarly, higher institutions in Nigeria must adopt the process of determining in advance the access of the teeming Nigerians into them by regions and zones of the country.

Manpower planning is a task that requires serious attention paid to the admission needs of the economy at any given time. The plan for admission is not usually done haphazardly. In the view of Akangbou (1985, p. 3) it is consciously the Government's responsibility to link the development of access into their educational system to the demand for educated to develop those skills that are in acute shortage in the economy so as to increase the rate of economic development. The skill required by workers can be developed through the formal educational system. In this approach, in a situation of acute shortage of a particular skill, educational facilities ought to be expanded to train these personnel.

Manpower planning is embarked upon in the education industry to ensure that supplies are readily available to match requirements, that is, demands for school personnel. The planning may be through forecasts or projections of requirements. Manpower planning also requires a periodic manpower auditing. The task of manpower planning is usually hazardous in imperfect economies. Such situations create room for subjective recommendations because of lack of scientific basis of arriving at the figure recommended.

#### **Improved access and equity as necessities for admission policies**

The Jomtein World Declaration of March 1990, on the issue of the Rights of the Child to education stated succinctly that every person shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities (UNICEF, 1990; Verspoor, 1994 & Adamu, 2004). It also emphasized the removal of every obstacle that hampers access to education. One of the major Convention Rights is making higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means. It also declared that an active commitment must be made to removing educational disparities. Underserved groups; the poor, street and working children, rural and remote populations, nomads and migrant workers, indigenous peoples, ethnics, racial and linguistic minorities; refugees, those displaced by war, crises and people under occupation, should not suffer any discrimination in access to learning opportunities. One of the statements in the Annual Report 2007 of the Education International is in the Aim 3-which is ending discrimination in education.

However, making higher education accessible to all is one of the major problems facing the policies on education in Nigeria. The National Universities Commission (NUC, 2012) is faced with the necessity of access to higher education and this is compounded by population explosion, which is complicated by the competitive desire of every individual to possess educational certificate especially at the higher education. Consequently, the universities seem to be confronted with demands and measures beyond their capacity to maintain. This corroborates have Moja (2000) &

Obielumani (2008) who earlier stated that access to university education and the lack of capacity of the system to absorb the number of students seeking admission to university institutions continues to pose a serious problem. At a time it was estimated that out of 400,000 JAMB candidates seeking admission to university education, more than 320, 000, representing about 80% were not able to gain admission to any of the Nigerian universities. On another instance, out of about 800, 000 candidates that sat for the examination, only 147,000 were offered places in the existing universities, representing only 18.4% (Umar, Ismaili & Abdul-Hakimi, 2012). This could account for why it takes candidates a while to gain admission into the Nigerian university education, leading to a good number opting for an unintended course of study terminating in job mismatch. Sometimes, candidates were compelled to sit for the JAMB examination for years without gaining admission to any university.

In the Nigerian context, educational inequality is all about the gap between the southern and northern states of the country; it exists out of regional responsiveness to Western education in historical times till presently. JAMB (2001, 2011) declares that the existence of educational inequality or imbalance in opportunities for obtaining higher education has been observed among its various ethnic groups. This is one of the reasons for the friction often experienced between ethnic tribes. There is no doubt that the Southern States made more educational progress than the predominantly Moslem Northern States, where the Western education influence was to a large extent rejected. The effect of which could be subsumed in the inequality or imbalance that clearly reflects in levels of Nigeria's educational institutions (Owhondah, 2014). Categorically, Okobiah (2002) earlier stated that a tripled statistical differentials and inequality existed even at the tertiary education over the years between regions and zones of Nigeria.

#### **Type of admission policies**

The Federal Government has stipulated admission policies of merit, catchment area, education less privileged states (ELPS), direct entry, quota system, and other ratios to ameliorate access and equity problems into the federal and state higher institutions in the country (Micaiah, 2010; 2013 & Ubani, 2014):

- **Merit**

The merit policy mandates schools to admit 45% of their qualified applicants based on merit. This means, 45% should score equal or above the cut-off marks of the course they applied to study. Candidates with very high scores in each matriculation examination are given first consideration for their first choice of course and institution before other candidates.

- **Catchment Area**

The catchment policy addresses the issue of indignity. It states that 35% of applicants should be an indigene or close neighbours of the State where the school resides. The States of the Federation are grouped into catchment areas of each Tertiary Institution. It is also called 'Locality' which in most case is the geographical and/or socio-cultural areas contiguous to the institution candidate apply to. In this case, consideration is given to students who fall within the catchment area of the tertiary institution. Some of these institutions have all the states of the Federation as their catchment area while state-owned institutions have all the Local Government Areas of their states as their catchment area.

- **Education Less Privileged States (ELPS)**

The admission policy of Education Less Privileged States (ELPS) exists due to the inequality that exists in levels of education across the country, some 19 States (mostly States from the Northern Nigeria) are regarded as ELPS. The policy states that 20% admission should go to candidates from these States. Again, different cut-off marks apply to this category of candidates.

In this policy, certain states of the federation are considered educationally less developed. Candidates from these states are given special concession for admission. The tertiary institutions assign lower cut-off marks to this category of candidates so that they can be given opportunity to forestall a lopsided development of education in the country.

- **Admission by direct entry**

The policy of direct entry admission is for certain categories of candidates who need not go through the process of selection examination. They are candidates who possess higher entry qualifications such as Advanced Level Certificates, Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), National Diploma (ND), Higher National Diploma (HND), First Degree, etc. Nonetheless, they must satisfy the normal general entry requirements as a pre-requisite for admission. Students in this category are admitted into the second year (200 level students) in the university.

- **Quota system**

The quota system is any selection method for school admission whereby a certain set percentage of those selected must be of a given ethnic background and/or of a particular sex. The quota policy addresses inequity or inequality and equity or equality. The policy imposes a social consequence which is the production of conscious or unconscious rejection of specific social groups which are the results of decisions as to what opportunities are to be offered by the society, to whom they are to be offered, who is selected to fill them, and who does the selections. The concept assumes alternative descriptions as unequally yoked and equity formula which tantamount to resource control.

There are thirty-six State Ministries of Education and the Federal Ministry of Education with the Federal Inspectorate Division bringing the quota issue to the front-burner and to the extent that different applications of the rules, qualifications and standards are applied for the states. To take care of these discrepancies especially in admission for high density education areas (Oyo, Lagos, Edo, Delta, Imo, Akwa-Ibom, Cross-Rivers, Anambra States) and the low density education areas (Kaduna, Sokoto, Borno, Adamawa, Kano, Niger, Zamfara ) States, quota system and catchment area have to be applied (Okobiah, 2002).

- **The 70:30 Technology/Non-Technology Policy**

The policy states that 70% of admissions must be granted to candidates that applied to study courses in the Technology discipline while the remaining 30% should be non-Technology disciplines. This means, candidates that applied to study courses in the Engineering discipline and the Sciences will constitute 70% of total admission.

- **The 60:40 Science and Humanity Policy**

The 60:40 Science and Humanity policy states that 60% of admission should be granted to candidates that applied to study courses in the Sciences while the remaining 40% should be for Humanities. Faculties such as Sciences, Engineering, Environmental Sciences, Basic Sciences, Agriculture Sciences, Medical/Pharmaceuticals and selected Science-oriented courses in Social Sciences and Education will be

categorized as Sciences while Faculty of Arts, Education, Law, Business Administration or Management will be regarded as Humanities.

These policies (45:35:20) for Federal schools, (40:40:20) for State schools, (70:30) for Technology/non-Technology courses and (60:40) for Science and Humanity course are stipulated as guide for higher educational institutions and for course selection so that the institutions could easily achieve their admission goal (Ubani, 2014).

#### **Achievements of admission policies into higher education**

The proponents of the admission policies (Obielumani, 2008; Micaiah, 2010; 2013 & Ubani, 2014) have credited them with the following under listed achievements:

- **Egalitarianism through quota system**

A true and functionally practiced quota system can be egalitarian. The system offers an open practice, which makes education truly a social good that in the words of Obielumani, (2008) corroborates education as broad and flexible, opened to ideas and students, regardless of their conformity to past patterns (Little, 1981). Implicitly, selection by exclusion is changed to free and open opportunity while the purposes of education are enlarged.

Egalitarianism or educational equity is a policy carried out in most countries of the world with multi-ethnic, racial and immigrant problems. Education is a social policy of particular importance for achieving unity in a multi-ethnic, just and harmonious society like Nigeria. The education service has important contributions to make the well-being of immigrant communities and the promotion of harmony between the different ethnic groups of which Nigeria is now is one of them. The education service is made to assist "citizens of all ages to develop their opportunities to the full and provides a special obligation to children who are at risk of not achieving their true potential.

- **Redistributing society's resources**

The admission policies seem very attractive about the idea of equalizing educational opportunities in higher education. Gray (1981p. 77), states that like economic growth it offers a way of redistributing society's at a relative ease. This is to say that investment in children's education promises a measure of social change at comparatively little cost to the present generation.

- **Serves as broader social policies**

Equalizing higher educational opportunities for access serves to ensure social mobility. Opportunities may be equalized by appropriate methods of selection and promotion, such as "quota systems" or by improvements in the methods of educational finance; equity through education can be achieved only within the context of broader social policies" (World Bank, 1979 as cited in Obielumani, 2008, p. 4).

- **Serves as legal backing for a just and egalitarian society**

The egalitarian offer of the quota policy ensures that the various levels of government - federal, state and local have seen higher education as a higher social good that should eliminate ignorance, dependency, illiteracy, malnutrition, disease, high rate of unemployment and poverty among the people. The extent to which this policy is considered as an instrument for correcting educational inequality among the various states, regions or zones in the country can be seen in the national philosophy of Nigerian Education as the legal backing of the quota system. Hence, the objective of a just and egalitarian society as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004) and the Second National Development Plan (Federal Republic of Nigeria,

1974) is necessary foundation for education industry in Nigeria.

- **Measures for accomplishing equity in education**

The admission policies of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board aimed to fulfill its mandate of streamlining admissions and expanding access to universities are other measures aimed at accomplishing equity in education (Obielumani, 2008, p. 5). The policies and objectives of the JAMB such as merit, catchment area, education less privileged/states, quota system, and direct entry are affirmative methods (Ogunyemi, 1994). They are provided so that candidates should have even access and equal admission into higher institutions in Nigeria.

- **Measures towards balancing the imbalance**

According to Obielumani (2008), the proponents of admission policies opine that the JAMB ratios of "thirty percent (30%) of the total admission to catchments area; forty percent (40%) to merit; twenty percent (20%) to education less privileged states and ten percent (10%) to university discretion are all in order" (p. 6). Adeyemi (2001) was of the opinion that the catchment area policy for admissions into higher institutions of learning should be maintained because it is aimed genuinely at balancing the imbalance educationally speaking between the North and South. Earlier, Salim (1999) noted that JAMB is a bold step and a framework to put a stop to multiple applications and admissions as well as enhancing increased access into universities. Similarly, Megaforce (1999) perceives it as a medium balancing the so-called educational inequality between the North and the South.

#### **Challenges of admission policies for higher institutions**

The admission policies of the Federal Government including the merit, catchment area, educational less privileged states, quota system (Obielumani, 2008) and other criteria for federal and state higher institutions have been strongly contested; highlighting some of its challenges as major defects, and these include:

- **Denial of admission (leading to social injustice)**

The issue of Catchment area policy is said to have over the years denied candidates from other ethnic backgrounds access to higher education admission, thereby staking the issue of equity. The policy directs candidates to go back to their own State to study because of even if they are not resident there. This belies the philosophy of the Social Demand Approach (SDA) to educational planning which believes that it is the responsibility of the appropriate government to offer the qualified candidate admission at request into the higher institution.

- **Examination malpractice and exploitation**

Some candidates see access into higher institution as a do or die affair. In order to gain admission adopts all costs and means in order to overcome the hindrances posed by the policy criteria. Candidates are said to have resorted to cheating methods such as paper leakage, creation of special examination center to promote examination malpractices, and bribery. Perhaps the candidate had stayed at home for years because of limitations imposed by these policies. Candidates spend large sum of money trying to obtain a leaked paper or be given admission. In the curiosity for access some candidates may have fallen into the hands of dupes (popularly known as 419) who are people with fake admission offers or fake and illegal responsibilities.

- **Sexual intimidation/prostitution**

Most often female candidates are vulnerable to immorality, rape, assault, abuse, threats and other unusual practices including exorbitant financial demands or bribery.

- **Administrative consequences**

Sometimes academic and administrative staff of universities are exposed to potential litigation (Katter, 2006), vulnerable to the use of derogatory statements as a result of breach of illegal contract over failure to fulfill admission promises, substandard or inadequate services. This failure could compel the student to go to court seek redress. The university of 21 century is thus perceived by Katter (2006) as no more a “cloistered sanctuary” but a business enterprise providing professional services at a price (whether paid to the university or government); dealing with client or consumer status than of the student; so that it becomes an issue of delivery of service in a professional standard.

- **Discrimination, domination and deprivation**

Megaforce (1999) described the JAMB admission policies as attempts to stem educational advancement in the South so that the North could catch up. This could account for why Adeyemi (2001) argued that the operations of JAMB are a “fraud”. It was observed that some eligible candidates in the Northern states could not fill up the quota for catchment area; in most cases, the education less privileged states could not present qualified candidates to fill up their 20% quota because all the candidates have been absorbed in the catchment area quota”. This has led to under-enrollment and over-population of some universities, thus leading to under-utilization and over-utilization of resources, respectively. Hence, the issue of quota system operates in form of ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’ (Kosemani, 1995).

Equalization of access in admissions is fraught with contradictions because educational systems all over the world have always failed to ensure mass participation of citizens and practically discriminatory in selection, promotion and career determination processes. Higher education admissions also show an elitist bias, favouring urban, upper and middle income groups at the expense of the rural and urban poor. The implementation of admission policies rather leads more to meritocracy or mediocrity in consequential manner.

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative to assert that a meaningful higher education is the yearning of Nigerians, it comes through adequate establishment and even distribution of these institutions to encourage its accessibility to local indigenes and promotion of equal (or near) educational attainment in a heterogeneous society.

There is no doubt that the admission policies of merit, catchment area, and education less privileged states, quota system and other criteria have made the system a reality. This may have influenced the World Bank’s position that the general character of a country has obvious implications for policy formulation (World Bank, 1994; Aderounmu and. Ehiametalor, 1985), and which to an extent could account for the framework that justifies the provisions of various admission policies as a way of ameliorating the challenges of access and equity in the education industry in Nigeria.

The issues affecting equality of access to higher education among the states, zones and between the regions of Nigeria can be traced to the heterogeneous character of the country and challenges inherent in the operations of admission policies. An immediate social restructuring of the country for now may be difficult. Nevertheless, a truly applied admission

policies for improved access and equity in higher education remains palpable for inter-ethnic unity, harmonious and equal social development. On the other hand, a misapplication of these policies in view of heterogeneous factors in an attempt to ensure access and equity in higher educational opportunities is tantamount to discrimination, domination, deprivation and retrogression.

This paper therefore submits that the existing disparities in the regional access and equity for higher education in the country should continue to be made a national issue and so addressed for improvement. The various states, regions, zones, corporate organizations and individuals should be equipped and sufficiently empowered to invest in the establishment of higher institutions in order to increase access of local indigenes to education and reduce inequalities existing in the system in the country. There should be a continuous national legislation to address the issues of improved access and equity for higher education based on the economic principle of positive discrimination. It implies that the existing admission policies are measures towards achieving improved access and equity relative to regions, which does not mean sameness or uniformity, but equal treatment of heterogeneous characteristics of Nigeria’s higher education system.

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