

# ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF ACCESS AND MANAGEMENT OF ADMISSION TO UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*University Education is obviously the basic instrument of economic growth and technological advancement in any country. It is in recognition of this fact that admission to universities is now becoming unbearable in Nigeria. Perhaps, the increased admission to universities is connected to special recognition attached to university graduates in the world of work and this has made people clamouring for admission to the universities. It is therefore sad to note that the percentage of people seeking admission into Nigerian Universities is far more than what these countable universities can absorb. Hence, there is problem of access and management of admission in the universities in the country. This explosive population of people seeking admission into Nigerian Universities coupled with wrongly implemented policies of the government like quota system, catchment areas undoubtedly worsen the situation. Thus, The National Universities Commission (NUC) which regulates University education in terms of standards has set merit, carrying capacity, catchment areas and quota for educationally disadvantaged states as criteria for admission into Federal Universities, excluding State and private universities which charge exorbitant fee. This paper therefore examines the issues and challenges of access and management of admission to Universities in Nigeria. To do this, efforts were made to examine the operation of the higher education in Nigeria, the concept of access in education, the Federal government admission guidelines; the vast initiatives of the government towards ensuring access and management of admission to our universities and issues and challenges of access and management of admission to universities in Nigeria were seriously dealt with. At last, recommendation such as the need for the government to review the policies of quota system, federal character and catchment areas, hence making admission to universities liberalized was proffered.*

## Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 had a right to education as one of its components. The right to education according to Tomasevski (2003) among others implies that everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory, technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. By this, governments are obliged to make education available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable. The right to education also involves four key actors:

- a) The government as the provider or funder of public schooling
- b) The child as the bearer of the right to education
- c) The child's parents (the first educators)
- d) The professional educators namely the teachers.

The National Policy on Education (2004) in accordance with the national goals and philosophy of education states that every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or unimagined disabilities each according to his or her ability. The provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal system is, therefore, the objective of the policy. This philosophy is in consonance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which asserts that everyone has a right to education. The key human rights requirement is that education should be a public responsibility, funded by tax-payer fund. It should not only be a free public service but a freely traded service. When university education was accessible as a matter of right, students' enrolments world-wide increased six-fold from 13 million in 1960 to 82 million in 1995. The rupture of the trend was announced by the World Bank in 1994 (Tomasevski, 2003).

Furthermore, Nigerian National Policy on Education in Section 1, paragraph 1 clearly enunciated government's plans to ensure that everyone was afforded an opportunity within and outside the formal school system to acquire as much education as she can at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels so that each person is able to contribute meaningfully to national development. In Section 5 of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) clearly articulated how it intends to widen access to higher education, especially in the universities, such that everyone that demands university education would have a fair chance of being selected. It is probably with this intent that the government has initiated some programmes and actions that have changed the landscape of widening access to university education. A brief highlight of some of these innovations may be useful here. Nigeria has urged its universities to ensure that everyone who is afforded the opportunity of university education equitably develops his or her intellectual capacities to be able to understand and appreciate their environments whether it is internal or external. In anticipation of the global changes that may impact on universities in Nigeria, Section 5, paragraph 34 (1) has stipulated that there is need to diversify university programmes for the development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the economy, without any prejudice to intellectual training in the basic sciences and the liberal arts (NPE, 2004).

In order to ensure quality university education and to guarantee that university programmes and courses reflect national needs, Nigeria has put in place what it calls the National Universities Commission (NUC) and another government agency called Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in order to ensure that educationally disadvantaged states within the country are not left behind. Although an agency such as JAMB tries to ensure equitable representation of all states in the university education in terms of enrolment, it is in a way a contradiction of the principles of

justice and equity in terms of widening access. The changing landscape of widening access to university education in Nigeria has brought in the adoption of the new methodologies by the National Open University (NOUN) that had been scrapped by the military in the early 1981 but that is now reintroduced by the former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In spite of the Federal government's efforts at making university education accessible for all and sundry, it is observed that, such efforts proof abortive. This is evident in the disparity between the enrolments of male and female as well as students from various zones in Nigeria. It in connection to the above that this paper examines the issues and challenges of access and management of admission to Universities in Nigeria, with a view that discussion in this study will enable the government, policy makers and the stakeholders in education to be aware of these critical issues and challenges and take appropriate measures accordingly. To guide this study, the following questions are raised:

1. What is the operation of higher education in Nigeria?
2. What is access in education?
3. What are the admission guidelines into Universities in Nigeria?
4. What are the various government initiatives in ensuring access and management of admission to Universities in Nigeria?
5. What are the main issues and challenges of access and management of admission to Universities in Nigeria?

### **The operation of Higher Education in Nigeria**

Nigerian higher education system is comprised of universities, polytechnics, and colleges offering programmes in almost all sphere of learning. It is the largest and most complex higher education system on the continent. The other higher education institutions (Polytechnics, Monotechnics, and Colleges of Education) are estimated to be over 139 in number (Obasi, 2008). The Federal Ministry of Education has responsibility for all federal higher institutions in Nigeria. The remaining higher education institutions are primarily controlled and funded by the State Governments, although private higher education is now getting started. According to Muraina (2010) referencing National Policy on Education (2004) the goals of tertiary education include, to;

- a) Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- b) Develop and includes proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- c) Develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and internal environments;
- d) Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
- e) Promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
- f) Forge and cement national unity; and
- g) Promote national and international understanding and interaction, tertiary education is given in different institutes.

Specifically therefore, the objectives of the university education according to NPE (2004) are:

- a) Intensifying and diversifying its programmes for the development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the nation;
- b) Making professional courses to reflect our national requirements; and
- c) Making all students, as part of a general programme of all-round improvement in university education, to offer general study courses such as history of ideas, Philosophy of knowledge and nationalism.

Hence, the university sub-sector in itself is diverse and complex due to its organization into institutions funded by the Federal government and institutions that are funded by the State governments. Major reform initiatives such as the World Bank (Saint, Hartnet & Strassner, 2003) project in the early nineties targeted the Federal universities only. The main objective of the project was to improve the effectiveness and relevance of university teaching and research and to encourage the universities to be more cost effective. The project was successful in bringing about changes in operational matters such as management efficiency and limited quality improvement but encountered difficulties in bringing about changes in areas that needed policy changes by the government, such as growth in the system and funding arrangements. The system has expanded rapidly in terms of the number of institutions established, new programmes, and the number of students admitted at higher education institutions.

Nigerian higher education institutions operate at a higher capacity than they were originally established for, yet the demand for access continues to rise. The demand for greater access to higher education continues unabated due to its social benefit, especially in a society in which social mobility depends largely on the level of education acquired. High unemployment rates of graduates, particularly in their specific fields of training, remains a problem, but this has not served as a deterrent to those seeking admission into institutions of higher learning. The need for higher education is partly based on the fact that those with higher education qualifications have a better chance of securing a job in a tough market compared to those without higher education qualifications.

### **The concept of access in Education**

Access according to the National Policy on Education (2004) implies making it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it. Tonwe (2005), Dada (2004) defined access as the right to receive formal education as distinct from informal education, while UNESCO (2003) puts access in tertiary education as meaning ensuring equitable access to tertiary education institutions is based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance. Equity in education implies ensuring that all the segments of the society get their fair share of access to whatever educational opportunities being provided (Ene, 2005). In essence, access implies opportunity for formal education while equity is fairness in admission. The National Policy on Education provides for equal opportunities for all Nigerian citizens at all levels of education without discrimination. In Nigeria today, access to the universities is much talked about by all stakeholders (Saint, Hartnett and Strasser, 2003).

According to Okebukola (2006), expansion and diversification in higher education, driven by the demand of an upwardly mobile population and the needs of a globalised economy, are important factors underlying the rising demand for university education in Nigeria. The major contributory factors in this expansion include high population growth, expansion of basic and secondary education and the number and rate of growth of students that want university education. The entire university system in Nigeria can only accommodate about fifteen percent of those seeking admission. Nevertheless some of the most significant policy initiatives that have increased

access to university education are the licensing of 42 private universities and the re-opening of the National Open University.

The establishment of more universities by state governments is further complementing the efforts of the federal government in this regard. In the development of higher education, access must not be restricted, inhibited or denied by any policy. Ilusanya (2008) sees the issue of access as politics. He observes that variations in educational development between the southern and northern parts in Nigeria had necessitated the introduction of certain policies to engender even national representation in institutions nationally owned. The problem of multiple admissions into Nigerian universities and the inability of universities to predict their future fresh student population gave rise to the centralisation of university admission, through the creation of Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 1978 by military Decree No.2 of 1978. Akpotu (2005) posited that the major obstacles to increased access to higher education in Nigeria are not prices but the reform policies of quota system, catchment area admission policy, poor and inadequate facilities and the limited absorptive capacity of Nigerian universities. The declared objectives of JAMB at inception were to develop machinery for streamlining university admissions on a uniform and fair basis. JAMB was set up to evolve uniform standards for university admissions and to ensure that merit serves as the basis of selection of candidates for admission. However, Obilade (1992) found out a contradiction between the stated goals of JAMB and what is in practice. A quota based system of non academic considerations predominates. JAMB examinations became a political tool to be used for equalizing educational opportunities between the advantaged states in the south and disadvantaged states in the North. The JAMB documents specified catchment areas. Catchment area means geographical areas in which higher educational institution is permitted or obliged to select candidates. The general operations of JAMB indicates a political tool by government to equalize educational development between the north and south and by implication decelerating higher education development in advanced southern states. The pattern of admission requires merit 45%, catchment area 35%, disadvantaged areas 20% and discretion 10% (Obilade, 1992).

Any violation of this provision attracts a reduction in vote allocation by N100, 000.00 (one hundred thousand naira). The politicization of admission has the effect of forcing integration, stifling academic freedom and ending the autonomy of the Universities. Saint, Hartnet & Strassner, (2003) conducted a research on the effects of these methods of admission for university education and found significant differences in academic performance between students admitted on merit and those admitted on other criteria. The drop-out and repetition rates for the latter were three times greater than for the merit based group. The system of admission through JAMB had continued to come under heavy criticisms as various studies conducted continued to reveal lack of a relationship between JAMB entry scores and performance in degree examinations. This situation that had been threatening quality of higher education products had to forcefully give way to the universities to become somehow involved in the selection of their intakes.

The Federal Government as part of the reform efforts in 2005 allowed universities to conduct post university matriculation examinations (Post-UME) screening for candidates that have achieved a certain level of performance in JAMB examinations. Screening has taken various forms, depending on the approach of the university and this is another problem entirely in the development of higher education as it appears that we now have multiple hurdles before intending candidates could secure admission into the university system. The hurdles require firstly, passing the senior secondary school certificate examinations, secondly passing the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board Examinations and thirdly passing the University of choice's screening tests.

In most developed countries of the world where universal education has been achieved, the right of access to primary, secondary, and higher education is guaranteed. In America for instance, the demand for higher education is so high that the gross enrolment ratio is about 100% while that of Nigeria is five percent (5%) (Adeotomre, 2007). What happens to the remaining 95% percent? The demand for university education has become very high in recent times.

The demand for university education has reached an unprecedented high level that Nigeria needs more than double the current number of universities to meet the required need.

### **Admission Guidelines into Nigerian Universities**

The Federal Government guidelines for admissions into its institutions of higher learning are based on 45% Merit, 35% Catchment/Locality and 20% Educationally Less Developed States. It should be noted that western education is at different levels of development in the different component units of the federation. This is as a result of different contact time with the western world.

### **Admission on Merit**

Candidates with very high scores in each matriculation examination are given first consideration for their first choice of course and institution before other candidates. Forty-five percent (45%) of the available spaces are reserved for such applicants.

### **Catchment Areas**

To give equal opportunities to all applicants, the States of the Federation are grouped into catchment areas of each Tertiary Institution. It is also called Locality which in most cases is the geographical and/or socio-cultural areas contiguous to the institution candidate apply to. Consideration is given to students who fall within the catchment area of the Tertiary Institution. Some 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. According to the admission guidelines, thirty-five percent (35%) of the available spaces are reserved for applicants from such states or locality (Adeyemi, 2001).

### **Educationally Less Developed States (ELDS)**

Certain states are considered educationally less developed or disadvantaged. The following states are considered Educationally Less Developed or Disadvantaged States (ELDS): Adamawa, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Ebonyi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Rivers, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe, and Zamfara. 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. By this system, it means that a candidate in the southern states, considered to be educationally advantaged, who scores 300 out of 400, may not get admission into the university while his counterpart in the north who scores less would be admitted. Much as it is good that the educationally disadvantaged areas are being encouraged, it should not be at the detriment of others. A situation where a candidate does not gain access just because of his birth place is not too good. The universities may be encouraging these set of candidates while they are throwing away other quality students. Using the quota system to guide and regulate access to university education has an inequitable effect (Akpan & Undie 2007).

**Discretion** which is left to the university

Thus, the guidelines on admission into federal universities are based on the above four elements and defined in the directive as follows:

Academic merit	40%
Catchment area	30%
Educational less developed states	20%
Discretion	10%

**Source:** Education Sector Analysis, 2003

### **Government Initiatives in ensuring Access and management of admission to Universities in Nigeria**

Some of the bold initiatives of the Federal Government towards ensuring access and management of admission to Universities in Nigeria are discussed below:

**Licensing of Private Universities:** The legitimatization of private universities in Nigeria was the famous Supreme Court decision in favour of Basil Ukaegbu, the proprietor of the Imo State Technical University in a case against the Imo State Government that had declared the institution illegal (Okwori & Okwori, 2007). This singular Supreme Court judgment threw the door open to private higher institutions in Nigeria. Within a short time four Universities came up in Imo state and later Anambra and Cross River states. These established universities then were more oriented to profit than quality and so with the intervention of the military government in 1983, these mushroom private universities were closed down. By the constitution of 1979, the Federal Government lost its central control over the university system and this accounted for the proliferation of state and private universities. Under the military regime of Abdulsalami Abubakar, four private universities were again opened. During the fourth civilian regime of Olusegun Obasanjo from 1999 to 2007 over thirty universities were established. Currently, there are 32 private Universities in Nigeria (UTME Brochure, 2011). The deregulation and autonomy policy allows private participation and licenses were granted to operate these universities after meeting the requirements set by NUC to the increasing demand for university education. To a certain extent, the establishment of these private universities will satisfy the qualified candidates who could afford the cost of private universities. The less privileged are still denied access. The student enrollment level of the private Universities is still low and may not be an immediate solution to the problem of access. According to Obasi (2008), the total enrollment in 23 private universities in Nigeria in May 2007 was 37, 636 students representing only 3.4 % of the total enrollment into universities. This figure was from institutions that had operated for 8 years beginning from 1999 when the first three private universities were licensed. In 2009, total enrollment (41, 884) in 30 private Universities was about the same enrollment in one federal University, for example Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria had total enrollment of 39, 219 students and the University of Maiduguri had total enrollment of 38, 514 students (Obasi et al. 2010).

**Establishment of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN):** The Federal Government shares responsibility with the states in the supply of higher education in the country. Higher education has, therefore, been deregularized bringing in private ownership. Access can further be enhanced to those who need university education with the opening of the National Open University and Distance Learning. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) stated emphatically that maximum efforts would be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to through

open universities or part-time. Open or Distance Learning, is referred to as life-long learning, life-wide education, adult education, media based education, self-learning (NPE, 2004). The government still eager to enhance access to universities approved the Open University and Distance Learning. Open and Distance Learning has addressed access to university education more than private Universities. It is a good means of bridging the demand and supply gap. They also offer opportunities for those students who are unable to reside on campus. The admission policy is quite flexible and open to everyone, including the disabled such as blind, deaf and dumb who desire a higher education. The student can determine the pace he can work and study centres are available in all state capitals. Open universities make use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which is globally recognized for teaching and learning. Without any doubt, open universities and distant education is a right step in the right direction in addressing the issue of access to Nigerian universities. The problem envisaged is the problem of quality of instruction and the stability of the system.

### **The recent establishment of 9 federal universities in different places in the Six geo-political zones.**

#### **Issues and Challenges of Access and management of admission to Universities in Nigeria**

There are certain issues that need to be examined if meaningful access and management of admission to universities in Nigeria is to be achieved. These issues are:

#### **Government Policy**

(i) Quota System: The Federal Government of Nigeria introduced the quota system in an attempt to provide equity in the university but this has been grossly abused and has indeed become a problem to access to university education to many candidates. The Federal Character Commission (FRN 1996) states that it involves lowering the entry qualification of states considered disadvantaged. Educationally less developed or disadvantaged areas are given 20%, exclusive admission chances to the detriment of candidates with higher scores in the matriculation examination.

(ii) Carrying Capacity: The demand for university education is expanding coupled with the population growth in the institutions. The universities should be expanded according to the demand. Instead of the expansion to meet the demand, the National Universities Commission (NUC) the regulatory body for all Nigerian Universities at a time came up with what is known as carrying capacity. The NUC inspected some universities and found out that many are over-populated and facilities are overstretched. The carrying capacity means that students are admitted based on the facilities available. These facilities include adequate lecture rooms, well stocked libraries, good staff/student ratio, accommodation, etc. Such policy is expected to enhance quality. However, this policy has become an impediment to access to university education as Universities are careful not to exceed this capacity by high margins in order not to incur sanctions from the NUC.

(iii) Funding: Closely connected with the issue of expansion is the demand for better funding. Expansion should be accompanied with increased funding. The budgetary allocation to education has been on the decline. In 1999, 11.12% of annual budget was allocated to education. This was drastically reduced to 5.9% in 2002 and 1.83% in 2003 (Akpan & Undie 2007), The minimum standard set for developing countries is 26%. Instead of moving towards this minimum standard, the experience is a decrease, therefore, making expansion to be difficult if not impossible. Poor funding also denied many university courses from being accredited by NUC thereby reducing the access of many who could have been admitted. The obvious is that universities in Nigeria need to be better funded. The Education Tax Fund (ETF) is a welcome development and many infrastructural



developments are carried out with Education Tax Fund. The government should on its own part increase the budgetary allocation to meet the recommendation for developing countries. The UNESCO's recommended 25% of the annual budgetary allocation to education sector is far from being implemented in Nigeria.

(iv) **Socio-Economic Background:** Ehiamezor (2005) revealed in his study that 70.2% of Nigerians are poor and went on to say that only 29.8% of families can live on one dollar (N140.00) or above a day. Muraina (2010) submitted that Socio-Economic Status is a widely used contextual variable in education research and it may take many forms, family income, parents' education level, home resources, parents' occupation; family structure, the number of books in a student's home etc. Williams (2004) corroborated this fact that out of the population of 150 million Nigerians, about 120 million are poor. Many cannot afford to pay their children's school fees. The socio-economic hardship experienced by the parents deprives many of access to university education. The initiative of the government in granting license for the establishment of private universities is not a total solution to access as many of these poor ones cannot afford the exorbitant fees charged by these private universities. Only the children from the privileged class or high socio-economic background can afford the cost of these private universities. This means the issue of access and equity is not addressed.

(v) **Sex Discrimination:** This is another issue that hinders access to and equity in university education in Nigeria. By tradition or religion, preference is given to education of male children over that of females. The tradition of some parts of Nigeria favours the education of male children while the religion of some also favours male children. The females are given out in early marriage. Ehiamezor (2005) reported that the number of females who took the 2004 university matriculation examination (UME) was 353,834 compared to 438,703 in 2003; this is a drop of 19.5%. The traditional and religious beliefs affect adversely the female children's access to university education.

## **Conclusion**

The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) admits under twenty per cent (20%) of applicants from year to year since inception in 1978. This is as a result of impediments to access and management of admission in our universities. Hence, the issue of access to university education has not been fully addressed. Access has been made difficult because of some government policies such as catchment areas, educationally less developed states and NUC carrying capacity coupled with the inadequate finance, infrastructural facilities among others in the University system.

## **Recommendations**

In view of the above discussions, the following recommendations are made:

To enhance access to universities, the issue of quota system or federal character or catchment areas or locality should be reviewed. This means, in essence that admissions should be liberalized. NUC quality assurance should not be an impediment to admission.

The existing conventional universities should be well funded so that there will be expansion. The old buildings should be repaired and new ones built, so as to accommodate more students. It is because of the limited space that the NUC came about the policy of carrying capacity. When the existing universities are expanded more candidates would have more access.

Private universities can still be encouraged but profit-making should be minimized. University education can be seen as service oriented. They can still charge their fees but must not be exploitative.

Open Universities and Distance Learning (ODL) should be encouraged. Government should mount campaigns to sensitize the university candidates of the advantages of ODL and take the opportunity to acquire university education.

All efforts as above should be put in place to absorb the teeming population of qualified Nigerian youths into universities especially now that the products of the Universal Basic Education scheme, in a few years, time would be struggling for placement in the universities.

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