

Impediments towards Enlarging Access to Qualitative Tertiary Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the impediments to enlarging access to qualitative tertiary education in Nigeria. The study considered the meaning of tertiary education. It equally examined the trend of access to tertiary education in Nigeria. Similarly, the impediments to access to tertiary education in Nigeria were also discussed. These include the quota system, carrying capacity, poor funding, poor socio-economic background and sex discrimination. The efforts by government to increase access were also presented. The paper highlighted some recommendation which when implemented will increase access to qualitative tertiary education. Some of the recommendations are that the existing conventional tertiary institutions across Nigeria should be well funded by the owners so that there will be expansion and that the issues of quota system of admission or federal character or catchment's areas or locality should be reviewed. In conclusion, the paper emphasized the need for government to give top priority to reforming the educational system as to ameliorate the situation and enlarge access to qualitative tertiary education. The significance of the study is that the findings will go a long way in enlarging access to qualitative tertiary education in Nigeria. The findings of the study will impact positively on the educational development in Nigeria in that the citizenry will have enlarged access to qualitative tertiary education.

Keywords: impediments; access; qualitative education; quota system; carrying capacity; sex discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

There is no gainsaying that education is the basic instrument of economic growth and technological advancement in any society. It is in recognition of this fact that governments commit immense resources to ensure the provision of education for their citizens, and also tailor their policies toward ensuring that it is made accessible to the generality of their citizenry at all levels. Obviously, no country can progress if most of its citizens do not have education, particularly higher education. This accounts for the need and value of qualitative tertiary education in the life of any nation. To ensure quality tertiary education, and to guarantee that higher education programmes and courses reflect national needs, Nigeria has to put in place the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Commission for College of Education (NCCE) National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and particularly, the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) to ensure equitable access to tertiary institutions across the country. The NUC, for instance, regulates University Education in terms of standards, sets merit, carrying capacity, residence zones or catchment's areas and quota for educationally less developed states as criteria for admission into Federal Universities. In the same vein, the NBTE ensures standards in other higher education institutions (polytechnics, and monotronics). This is also applicable to NCCE. In any case, it has been argued that rather than enhance

access to tertiary education, these criteria restrict access to higher education. Thousands of applicants sit for the JAMB examinations from year to year since its inception in 1978, but not up to 20% on the average gain admission each year into the tertiary institutions. This is a constraint to tertiary Education.

In the light of the above, the main objective of this study was to investigate the impediments to enlarging access to qualitative tertiary education in Nigeria. The discussion is organized under sub-headings as shown below.

Tertiary Education System in Nigeria

Tertiary education, often called higher education is the education given in post-secondary institutions of learning such as universities, polytechnics, monotronics, colleges of Education, Colleges of Agriculture, Colleges of Technology, Correspondence colleges and allied institutions. Presently, there are about 261 tertiary or higher education institutions in Nigeria. Out of this number, the Nigerian University System has 122 institutions, made up of 36 Federal Universities, 35 state universities and 51 private universities with a total enrollment of about 726,760 students (Ukertor, National Media Broadcast, Wednesday, 22nd February, 2012). The remaining 139 comprised other federal, state and privately owned tertiary education institutions (polytechnics, monotronics, colleges of

education, etc) that train middle level manpower with specialized skills needed by most organizations (Obasi, 2008). By this number, the Nigerian tertiary education system would seem to have expanded or appreciated rapidly to absorb the number of candidates seeking admission into it, yet the problem of access to tertiary education in the country persists. This follows the ever-increasing number of qualified candidates that seek admission into institutions of higher learning every year.

Thus, despite the carrying capacity policy, Nigerian higher education institutions operate at a higher capacity than they were originally established.

According to Ukertor (2010:31), "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". Added to this fact is that those with higher education qualifications have a better chance of securing a job compared to those without higher education qualifications. Nevertheless, the more regrettable aspect of the situation, according to Ocho (2005: 139) is that learning institutions generally in Nigeria:

Are incapable of meeting the objectives for their establishment because of the poor quality and quantity of staff, lack of adequate infrastructure and equipment, and above all, lack of commitment of staff as a result of poor remuneration and uninspiring conditions of service.

The foregoing unfortunate situation makes Transformation of Education and Enlarging Access to Qualitative Tertiary Education an issue of concern.

Access to Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Nigeria with an estimated population of 170 million has only 261 institutions of higher learning, made up of federal, state and privately owned universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and technology as well as other degree-awarding institutions. This number of higher education institutions would seem to be grossly inadequate considering the unprecedented level of demand for higher education in recent times. Teeming numbers of Nigerian youths can hardly matriculate due to inadequate spaces in these institutions, which "can only accommodate about fifteen percent" of the teeming youths seeking admission (Ukertor, 2010:34). Other contributory factors to the rising demand for tertiary education in Nigeria are population explosion (high population growth), expansion of basic and secondary education, and the number as well as rate of growth of students that desire higher education among others. It goes without saying that the situation will worsen in some years ahead when the products or graduates of the Universal Basic Education Scheme (UBES) begin to enter into higher education institutions.

All the same, in most advanced countries of the world such as America, where the universal education has been achieved, the right of access to primary, secondary and tertiary education is guaranteed. For instance, in America, the demand for higher education is so high that the gross enrollment ratio is about 100%, while that of Nigeria is 5% only (Adeotomre, 2007). The question is: What happens to the remaining 95%? The answer to this question brings up the issue of access to tertiary education in Nigeria.

The word "access" implies making it possible for every child of school age to receive school education. Dada (2004) and Tonwe (2005) described access as the right to get or receive formal education as distinct from informal or outside school education, while the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) put "access in tertiary education" to mean "ensuring equitable access to tertiary education based on merit, capacity, effort and perseverance". In this connection, equity in education implies ensuring that every segment of the civil society receives its fair share of access to whatever educational opportunities that are provided (Ene, 2005).

Access simply means opportunity for formal education while equity is fairness in admission into school education. The right of every child to education world over is guaranteed in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 of 1948, which had a right to education" as one of its components (Ukertor, 2010:28). According to Tomasevski (2003), the right to education, among other things, implies that education is an entitlement to everyone. In other words, every person has school education as a fundamental right up to tertiary level. By this, governments of all nations are obliged to make school education available, accessible, acceptable and affordable to their citizens at all levels of education. Interestingly, Nigerian government encapsulated this sense of obligation in section 1, paragraph 4c of the National Policy on Education, which states, "every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or her ability" The objective of this policy is to provide 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, so that each person will be able to acquire as much education as he or she can at all these levels and contribute significantly to national development. This provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at all levels of education changed the landscape of widening access to higher or tertiary education in Nigeria.

The most significant policy initiatives taken by government that have increased access to tertiary education in Nigeria are the licensing of private tertiary education institutions across the country and the reintroduction of the National open University (by the former president of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo) that was scrapped by the military in 1981. The establishment of more universities by state governments is also complementing the effort of the Federal Government in this respect. Equally, commendable is government's effort to ensure quality higher education as well as equitable representation of all states in the tertiary education in Nigeria, which led to the creation of an agency called JAMB (by the military Decree No. 2 of 1978). One of the objectives of this agency is to develop machinery for streaming tertiary admissions on a uniform and fair basis. In other words, the essence of setting up JAMB is to evolve uniform standards for tertiary admission and to ensure that merit serves as the basis of selection of candidates for admission. Unfortunately however, there has been a contradiction between the stated goals of JAMB and what is in practice (Obilade, 1992). The JAMB admission policy has been found to be a quota based system in which non academic considerations specified catchment's areas, which means geographical areas in which higher educational institution is permitted or obliged to select candidates at the expense of better quality candidates that did not fall within the catchment's area.

Thus, Obilade (1992) observed that JAMB examinations are a mere political tool used by government to equalize educational opportunities or development between the advantaged states and disadvantaged states. Ukertor (2010:35) stated that the board's "Pattern of admission requires merit 45%, catchment's area 35%, disadvantaged areas 20%, and discretion 10%" Unfortunately, the entire tertiary education system in Nigeria can only accommodate about 15% of those seeking admission. The foregoing situations resulted in competition for access to the limited places and thereby led to sharp "practices such as cheating in examination, bribery for admission and manipulation of examination scores" (Ukertor, 2010:33).

Saint, Haratnet and Streansnet (2003) further reported the inefficiency or lapses of the JAMB in a study they conducted on the effects of its methods of admission for higher education and found significant differences in academic performance between students admitted on merit and those admitted on the criteria. The dropout and repetition rates for the latter were three times greater than for the merit- based group. The system of admission through JAMB had, thus, continued to come under heavy criticisms as various studies conducted continued to reveal a lack of relationship between JAMB entry scores and

performance in degree examination considering the situations, Akpotu (2005) stated that the major obstacles to increased access to higher education in Nigeria are the reform policies of quota system, catchment's area admission policy, poor and inadequate facilities as well as the limited absorptive capacity of Nigerian tertiary institutions. Following these situations, the demand for higher education in Nigeria in recent times has reached an unprecedented high level that access to tertiary education institutions continues to pose a serious problem.

Impediments to Access to Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Apparently from the discussion so far, the problem of access to higher education in Nigeria can be traced back to 1959 when the "Ashby Commission raised the issues of equity and access in higher education" (Ukertor, 2010:32). The Commission then reported among other things that there was an imbalance in educational opportunities between the northern and southern parts of the country and that opportunities for enrollment were inadequate for the needs of the nation. Since then, the problem of access to tertiary education due to the lack of capacity of the system to absorb the ever increasing number of students seeking admission into higher institutions of learning has continued to rise. This follows some impediments emanating from the government attitude and policies. Such policies are the quota system of admission, the NUC carrying capacity and poor funding. Other factors include poor socioeconomic background of students and sex discrimination in admission.

(1). The Quota System: This system was introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria in an attempt to provide equity in the tertiary education institutions but this has been grossly abused and has indeed become an impediment to access to tertiary education to many candidates. This system of admission, according to the Federal Character Commission in 1996, involves lowering the entry qualification of states considered educationally less developed or disadvantaged, which are given 20% exclusive admission chances to the detriment of better quality candidates with higher scores in the matriculation examination (Ukertor, 2010).

(2). Carrying Capacity: The carrying capacity means that students should be admitted based on the available facilities, such as adequate lecture rooms, well stocked libraries, good staff/student ratio, accommodation etc. Though this policy is aimed at ensuring quality of instruction (Oduwaiye, 2008), it has become a problem to access to higher education as the institutions are careful not to exceed their capacity by high margins so as not to incur sanctions from the regulatory bodies such as the NUC, NCCE and NBTE.

(3). Poor Funding: Poor funding is another factor militating against access to higher education in Nigeria. The budgetary allocation to education in

recent times has been on the decline. For instance, in 1999, 11.12% of annual budget was allocated to education. This was drastically reduced to 5.9% in 2001 and 1.83% in 2003 (Akpan & Undie, 2007). The minimum standard, set for developing countries is 26%. Instead of moving towards the minimum standard, the experience is a decline, thereby making expansion, which would have widened access to higher education to be difficult if not impossible. The implication is that there are not enough funds to develop infrastructural facilities in Nigerian tertiary education institutions. Such inadequate infrastructural facilities necessitated the N U C, NCCE and NBTE admission criteria of carrying capacity of the institutions to ensure quality control, which has become a restricting factor to access to tertiary education in Nigeria.

(4). Poor Socio-Economic Background: Ehiametalor (2005) revealed in his study that 70.2% of Nigerians are poor and that only 29.8% of families can live on one dollar (₦160.00) or above a day. Williams (2004) corroborated this fact that out of the population of about 150 million Nigerians over 120 million are poor. Many cannot afford to pay their children's school fees. Thus, the socio-economic hardship experienced by the parents or guardians deprives many of access to higher education. The government's initiative in the legitimization of privately owned tertiary institutions is not a total solution to access as many of these poor ones cannot afford the exorbitant fees charged by these private institutions. Such exorbitant fees charged make them seem exclusive to the well-to-do people in the society; which means the issue of access and equity is not addressed.

(5) Sex-Discrimination: Another issue that hinders access to and equity in higher education in Nigeria is sex discrimination. By tradition or religion, preference is given to education of male children over females. Ukertor (2010) observed that the tradition and religion of some parts of Nigeria favours the education of male children over those of females. The females are given out in early marriage. Ehiametalor (2005) reported that the number of females that took the 2004 university matriculation examination (UME) was 352,834 compared to 438,703 in 2003. This is a drop of 195%. This implies that traditional and religious beliefs adversely affect the female children's access to higher education compared to their males' counterpart.

Government Initiatives in Increasing Access to Higher Education in Nigeria

Based on the discussion so far, it is glaringly obvious that the problems of access to higher education in Nigeria are many and varied. Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge the fact that the government has attempted to tackle the problems through some policy initiative which include:

- (1). Licensing of Private Universities:** With the recent approval at the establishment of some new private universities across the country, private universities have grown from 42 to 51. To a certain extent, this will go a long way in satisfying the qualified candidates who could afford the cost of private universities. However, the fact remains that the less privileged are still denied access following the exorbitant fees charged in these private institutions, which make them the exclusive preserve of children of the few rich people in society. Hence, the legitimization of private institutions is of an immediate solution to the problem of access to higher education in Nigeria.
- (2). Reintroducing the National Open University of Nigeria (Noun):** Without doubt, the re-opening of the open universities and distant education (Distance Learning) is a right step in the right direction in enhancing access to those who need higher education in Nigeria. Open or Distance Learning is referred to as life-long learning, life-wide education, adult education, media based education, self-learning (NPE, 2004). It is a good means of bridging the demand and supply gap of higher education in Nigeria. The admission policy is quite flexible and open to everyone, including the disabled such as blind, deaf and dumb who desire a higher education (Ukertor, 2010). However, the obvious is that these policy initiatives have not addressed the increasing demand for higher education in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above discussions on access to higher education in Nigeria, these recommendations are made for implementation if meaningful access to higher education in the country is to be achieved.

- (1). The existing conventional tertiary institutions across Nigeria should be well funded by the owners so that there will be expansion. The old buildings should be repaired and new ones built, so as to accommodate more students. There is no doubt that when the existing institutions are expanded, more candidates would have more access to higher education in Nigeria.
- (2). The issues of quota system of admission or federal character or catchment's areas or locality should be reviewed. For instance, just as special admission chances are given to states considered educationally less developed or disadvantaged, same gesture should be extended to candidates from poor socio-economic backgrounds who find it difficult to afford their school fees. If possible, such students should be identified and placed on scholarship scheme. This, in essence, means that admissions should be liberalized to an extent that quality is not compromised.

(3). Private Tertiary Institutions can still be encouraged but profit making should be minimized. Tertiary education should be seen as service oriented rather than profit making. So, while they can still charge fees, it should not be exploitative so as to accommodate more people desiring higher education in Nigeria.

(4). Open Universities and Distance education should be encouraged. Government should mount campaigns to sensitize the masses, especially those who can benefit from higher education, and take the opportunity to acquire tertiary education.

(5). Given that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers, the era of messing up the teachers by treating them with condescension and indignity should be over (ended) in the entire education system. The government and society should place the teachers in the priority consideration, which they deserve through enhanced salary package, paying them before other categories of workers, improving their work conditions and environment and they will automatically respond positively to the demands of their calling.

CONCLUSION

Let us realize that the life, future growth, progress and development of any nation is a function of the quality of education received by the citizens. Teeming Nigerian youths who desire higher education to enable them better themselves and the society are denied access due to impediments emanating from some government policies, such as catchment's areas, educationally less developed states and carrying capacity as well as inadequate infrastructural facilities in the tertiary education system. As no nation can progress if most of its citizens have no school education, there is need for the government to give top priority to reforming the system to ameliorate the situation and make Nigeria better for us all. This major limitation of this study was the use of only library research. An empirical study of the same subject-matter could yield empirical results which might be different from the ones here; however, this does not invalidate the study.

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