

INCREASING ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: PRESENT CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract

This paper conceptualized access to education and presented documentary evidence regarding the demand and supply of university education in Nigeria. It reported that of the number of candidates applying for admission every year in Nigeria, only about 5.2% to 15.3% get admitted every year, meaning that about 84.7% to 94.8% of the candidates seeking admissions every year never get admitted into Nigerian universities. The paper recognized the fact that this low access to university education in Nigeria could be the result of the following: problem of carrying capacity; infrastructural/ facilities challenge; inadequate public financing; economic constraints; labor market failure (low absorptive capacity of the economy; and problem of curriculum and curriculum delivery. Towards achieving greater access to university education in Nigeria, this paper recommended the following: curbing financial waste in the Nigerian University System (applying the policy of consolidation to its letter); downsizing the number of support staff in Nigerian University System; retraining of Nigerian universities' academic staff to embrace ICT/ e – learning; mandating all universities in Nigeria to establish distance learning centres to provide more opportunities for all to have access to university education; and revision of education trust fund support for the production (books and journals in Nigerian tertiary institutions to be directed towards production) of online materials for distance learning centers that would serve the greater populace desiring university education.

KEY WORDS: Access to Education, Nigerian University System, Distance Learning

Introduction

The role of education in human development cannot be over emphasized. It has been described as an important tool in any human society, which makes man to develop faster than other creatures. Education is the bedrock of all human sectors – political, medical, agricultural, security, etc. This perhaps makes true the saying that, no nation can rise above the quality of education its citizens receive. Generally, Education aims at: careful observation of the given conditions to see what are the means available for reaching the end and to discover the hindrances in the way; it suggests the proper order or sequence in the use of the means; it makes choice of alternatives possible, because we can predict the outcome of acting this way or that way and then compare the value of the two courses of actions before passing judgment upon their relative desirability. It is an instrument of change; and it is an instrument of innovation and invention. The creativity, resourcefulness and imaginative abilities of learners are sharpened as they go through various educational programs (Itedjere, 1997; Whawo, 1997).

The five national objectives, which are: a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; a united, strong and self-reliant nation; a great and dynamic economy; and a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004), cannot be achieved without education. This perhaps may have informed the belief that education is an instrument of change. Hence, education must of necessity be geared towards the inculcation of the following:

- respect for the worth and dignity of the individual.
- faith in man's ability to make rational decisions
- acquisition of competences necessary for self-reliance.

It is in line with the above philosophy that education in Nigeria is directed towards self-realization, better human relationship, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, social, cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological progress (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004).

Accordingly, Omoregie (2010), reports that the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS), which is the Nigerian government's strategy for poverty reduction, recognizes education as a potent tool and formidable instrument to drive home the goal of NEEDS; which is transformation of the entire Nigerian polity. Thus, NEEDS' goals of wealth creation, employment generation, poverty reduction and value re-orientation can only be effectively pursued; attained and sustained through an educational system that is efficient and functional (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2008).

The thrust of this paper therefore, is to conceptualize Access to Education, provide information on access to higher education among fifteen (15) leading economies versus Nigeria; give a critical situational analysis of access to higher education in Nigeria; examine current challenges to providing increased access to higher education in Nigeria; and proffer solutions towards achieving increased access to higher education in Nigeria

Meaning of Access to Education

The conceptualization of access to education reflects the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that everyone has a right to education. Thus, access to education provides a guarantee for everyone entitled to education to receive it. It implies the right, opportunity or means of making education available within the reach of every citizen of a nation (Enaohwo 2009).

Access to education in its full and broad sense means free and unlimited/unhindered/unfettered opportunities at each level of education to obtain knowledge, skills, and abilities available at that level needed to optimally participate and contribute to development in the society (Okeke, 2009). Okeke (2009) further maintained that this definition of access to education covers the threshold of access/ enrolling, attending and completing and possibly transiting to the appropriate level of education. Thus, lack of access to education means any of the following: failing to enroll in an educational institution; lack of opportunities to attend school regularly; does not complete the prescribed programme of study; does not have opportunities required to attain the deserved goals; and lacks opportunities to transit to the next level of education.

In the context of this presentation, access to education would mean the extent to which people have access/unhindered opportunities to acquire university education in Nigeria. This can be best estimated from statistics of gross and net enrolment ratio.

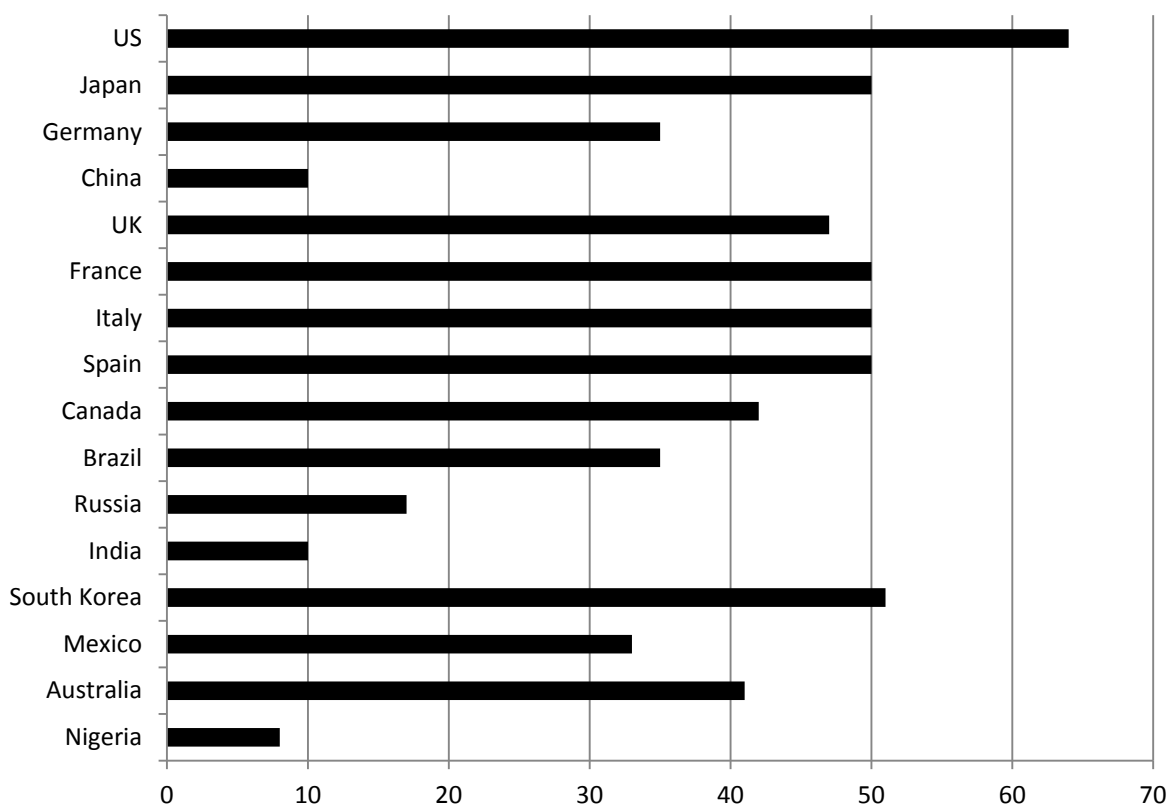
Higher Education Gap Analysis: Nigeria versus Top 15 Economies.

According to Okebukola (2008), enrolment rates are the measures of educational access, which have two main indicators: the first is the gross enrolment ratio (GER), which shows the total number of pupils enrolled at a given level of education system, irrespective of age, divided by the population of age group, which corresponds officially to that level. The other indicator is the net Enrolment ratio (NER).

Higher Educational Participation Rate (HEPR)

According to Okebukola (2008), higher education provides high level human resources for driving the economy and ensuring rapid societal transformation. That is, the greater the opportunity given to the citizenry for higher education, the more expansive the horizon for rapid social and economic development. This opportunity is in the form of the higher education participation rate, which is defined as the proportion of 18-35 years age group that is enrolled in tertiary education (Okebukola, 2008). Higher education participation rate for selected 15 countries is provided in the figure below.

Figure 1: Higher Education Participation Rate of Nigeria and 15 World Economies



Source: Okebukola, P.C. (2008, December 10-11). Education Reform: Imperatives for Achieving Vision 20-2020 Paper Presented at the National Summit on Education Organized by Senate Committee on Education, Held at Sheraton Hotel. Abuja.

From the above figure, the highest HEPR among the sixteen countries is 64% for USA, Spain, Italy and Japan recorded 50% each. The lowest HEPR for the league of 15 countries was 10%, while Nigeria's HEPR was 8.1%.

Situational Analysis of Access to University Education in Nigeria

Access to education has been contextually defined in this paper as the extent to which people have access/ unhindered opportunities to education. In terms of university education, it refers to the extent to which people have unhindered opportunities to pursue university education in Nigeria. As we all know, education statistics is a problematic area in the country. Either it is not available or it is not comprehensive or it is falsified (Okeke, 2009).

Enrolment Trends in Nigerian Universities

Nigeria is undoubtedly the most populous African country. One natural effect of this according to Ajayi and Adeniji (2009) is a phenomenal growth in enrolment leading to hysterical expansion, which, although, more prominent at the lower levels of the educational system has put more burden and pressure on the university education system.

Ajayi and Adeniji (2009) opined that in order to underscore the phenomenal development that has taken place in university education in recent years, the picture of quantum enrolment of students in Nigerian universities becomes highly imperative.

Table I: Enrolment in Nigerian Universities: 1960- 2008

Year	Number of universities	Total Enrolment	% Increase
1960/61	2	1395	-
1961/62	5	2406	72.47
1962/63	5	3,761	56.32
1963/64	5	5,106	35.76
1964/65	5	6,707	34.36
1965/66	5	7,709	14.94
1966/67	5	8904	15.50
1967/68	5	7,058	-20.73
1969/70	5	9,695	11.50
1970/71	5	14,468	49.23
1971/72	6	17,093	18.14
1972-78	13	48,698	184.94
1999-88	29	160,174	228.9
1989-99	39	574,723	258.8
2000-05	51	810, 220	40.98
2008	94	1, 096, 312	35. 31

Source: Adopted from Ajayi, K and Adeniji A (2009) Access to University Education in Nigeria Proceeding of the 23rd Annual Congress of Nigeria Academy of Education.

Table 1 shows that by 1960/61 session with only two universities in Nigeria, the total enrolment stood at 1,395. The table also reveals an astronomical rise in student enrolment figure beginning from 1989/99, when the number of universities also increased. For example,

the total enrolment of undergraduates in Nigerian universities rose from 374,723 in 1999 to 810,220 in 2005 and 1, 096, 312 in 2008. As Ajayi and Adeniji (2009) rightly observed, this increase in enrolment by world standard is quite high.

Demand and Supply of University Education in Nigeria

The scramble for admission into the existing universities in Nigeria is well documented. Table 2 provides information on the demand and supply of university education in Nigeria.

Table 2: Demand and Supply of University Education in Nigeria 2000- 2007.

Year	No. of Universities	Application	Admission	% Admitted	Total Unplaced
1998/1999	39	537,226	64,176	11.9%	473,050
2002/2003	53	994,381	51,843	5.2%	942,335
2003/2004	54	1,046,950	105,157	10%	941,793
2004/2005	56	841,878	122,492	14.5%	719,386
2005/2006	75	916,371	NA	-	-
2006/2007	76	806,089	123,626	15.3%	679,846

Source: Okeke, E. A. C (2009). Access in Nigerian education. Lead paper presented at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Nigerian Academy of Education, held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Table 2 reveals a constantly high rate of unsatisfied demand for university education in Nigeria. Specifically, it is evident that a percentage range of 5.2% and 15.3% of the total number of candidates seeking admission into Nigerian Universities finally get admitted. This means that a range of 84.7% and 94.8% of candidates seeking admissions into Nigerian universities never get admitted each year into Nigerian universities.

Challenges to Increased Access to University Education in Nigeria

The challenges of access to university education in Nigeria remain formidable (Federal Ministry of Education, 2009). These challenges include the following:

a. **The Problem of Carrying Capacity.**

The challenge of access to university education is compounded by the National University Commission's policy on carrying capacity. By this policy, the NUC has pegged the number of students that can be admitted by each university in Nigeria every year. This has obviously reduced considerably in recent years the admission into Nigerian universities. This is made clearer by the Federal Ministry of Education (2009), which noted that the carrying capacity of Nigerian university system stands at 150,000 while the actual demand is about 1 million.

In 2011/2012 academic session, a total of 1493,604 candidates sat for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examinations (UTME) conducted by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). In the results announced showed that 842,851 candidates scored below 200 marks over 400, indicating less than 45 per cent passed the examination. JAMB later fixed 180 marks as minimum for university students and 160 for Colleges of

Education and Polytechnic (Edukugho, 2011). Edukugho (2011) went further to posit that when the Executive Secretary of NUC was asked about the admission quota, he said one cannot be too sure, but thought that about 400,000 students may be admitted into all the universities in Nigeria but cautioned that all of them may still not qualify due to short comings here and there.

Today, the problem of access to university education is further compounded by over subscription to some universities especially for Federal universities because of low tuition and better infrastructure. For example, during the 2011/2012 admission year, a total of 99,195 candidates applied for placement at the University of Lagos that has a carrying capacity of a little above 6,000. What this implies is that over 93,000 candidates are going home unplaced at the University of Lagos. The picture is similar in all public universities.

b. Infrastructure/Facilities Challenge

Inadequate and obsolete infrastructure and equipment as well as poor library facilities remain the major challenge in Nigerian university. Thus, about 15-30% of the infrastructure, equipment and books are non-functional, obsolete or dilapidated (Federal Ministry of Education, 2009). Furthermore, the classrooms, laboratories and the general environment of most universities in Nigeria are still far from a state that will promote optimal learning, teaching and research (Okebukola, 2008).

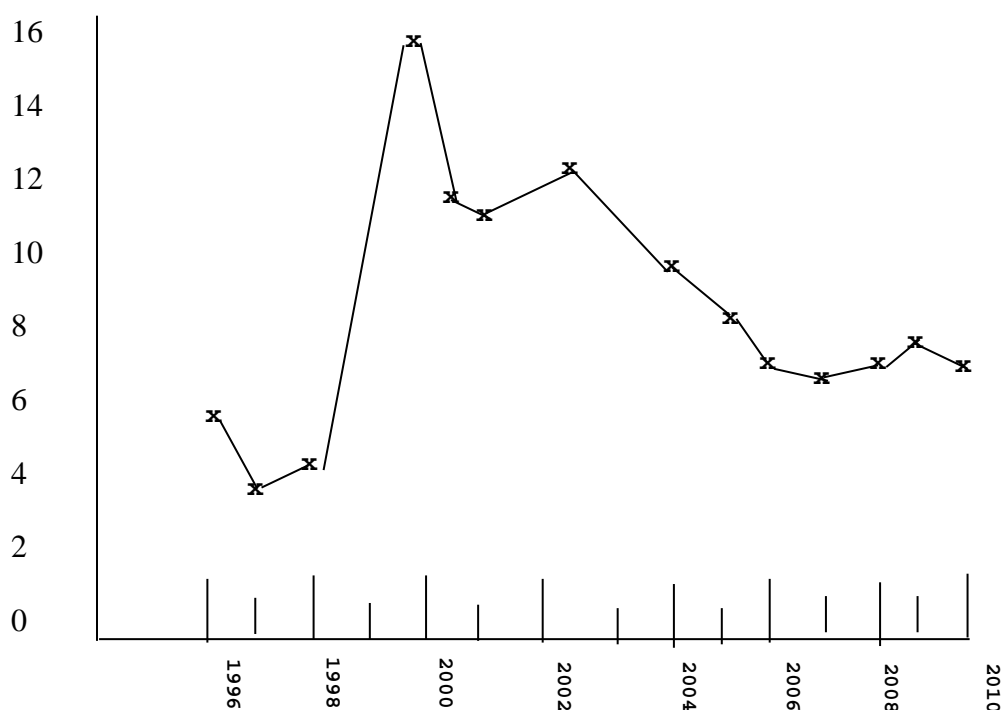
c. Inadequate Public Financing

Funding is central to unhindered access to university education. As it has been found that virtually all the problems of universities in Nigeria are attributable to inadequate funding (Ajayi and Adeniji 2009). As Okebukola (2005) rightly observed, the depressed quality of education in Nigeria has been explained in part by the inadequate funding of the system. As all stakeholders in the education sector have listed funding inadequacy as a problem.

Despite the recommendation of UNESCO of 26% of national expenditure must be devoted to education, a closer look at Nigeria's expenditure on education reveals that Nigerian government expends between 4% and 16% annually on education. Figure 2 below gives a graphical presentation of expenditure on education.

The implication of this poor public financing of education is the fact that it inhibits access to education, thus, giving only an insignificant number of candidates seeking admission opportunity to pursue degrees in the Nigerian University system. This may be the reason why research often indicates that school enrolment, completion, drop out from school are products of lack of finance.

Figure 2. Federal Government Budgeting Allocation to Education



Source. C. I Oriahi & P. Ebhomien, (2011). An Appraisal of the State of Education in Nigeria paper presented at NAWACS conference.

d. Economic Constraints

Nigeria's per capital gross domestic product is among the lowest in the world. Seven (7) out of every 10 Nigerians live on less than US \$1.00 per day. In the area of human

development, Nigeria is ranked 168th in the world (Rao, 2008). Connected with economic constraints is rapid population growth. Like most countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, population growth in Nigeria contributes to exacerbate economic, social and environmental problems. The reality of this is absolute poverty, which has led to high infant mortality and a precarious livelihood for the sick and the aged, and high rates of reproduction that further entrench a lifestyle of poverty among the growing numbers of the poor (Rao, 2008). The challenge of this is that many people are unable to guarantee themselves food talk less of the luxury of acquiring higher education.

(e). Labor Market Failure (Low Absorptive Capacity of the Economy)

According to Ajayi & Adeniji (2009), while it can be argued that unemployment among the better educated graduates is the consequence of institutional failures, the poor state of the economic growth in the face of the growing population accounts for the worsening scenario of unemployment over the years. Ajayi & Adeniji (2009) further opined from the reports of the Central Bank of Nigeria for a period of 10 years (1991-2000) that the GDP average growth rate was 2.8 percent, while population growth rate was 2.6 percent. This development, that is, with 2.8 percent increase in GDP can guarantee economic growth while the average percentage population growth stood at 2.6 percent during the same period.

Generally, only about 10% of the 130,000 students that graduate from Nigerian Universities annually are able to secure paid employment (Federal Ministry of Education, 2009).

(f). Academic Staff Inadequacies

A major factor to achieving the mission and vision of any university system is the lecturer. According to UNESCO (2007, cited in Okebukola, 2008) there is a plethora of evidence suggesting that teacher quantity, quality and motivation exert noteworthy effects on a host of school variables. He went further to outline the school variables to include enrolment, participation and achievements of pupils (university students in our case).

According to Federal Ministry of Education (2009), the total number of academic staff in the Nigerian university system as at 2006 is 27394, but about 50,000 (meaning a short fall of 19,548 academic staff) is required for effective course delivery across the disciplines. The implications of this obvious short fall in the number of academic staff may include: High academic staff/students ratio and severe stress on the academic staff on ground. This short fall in the number of academic staff can further lead to low productivity and decline in the quality of teaching in the Nigerian University System (Federal Ministry of Education, 2009; Okebukola 2008).

(g). Problem of Curriculum and Curriculum Delivery

One major factor affecting access to education has to do with the problem of curriculum. The curriculum of Nigerian universities is presently defective (Ajayi & Adeniji 2009), This may have arisen because of lack of relevance of academic programmes, loss of programme focus by some specialized universities to match graduate output to national manpower requirements. ((Federal Ministry of Education, 2009). Because of the obvious deficiencies in the curriculum at all levels of education in Nigeria especially in relation to relevance and adequacy of content to meet contemporary needs of a knowledge society, major stakeholders of tertiary education in Nigeria (National Universities Commission, National Commission for Colleges of Education and the National Board for Technical Education) are now taking steps to revise higher education curricular.

In the area of poor curriculum delivery, the use of lecture method in our universities can be traced to poor quality preparation and perhaps resource in adequacy (Okebukola 2009). One may not also forget the high student and academic staff ratio, leading academic staff to teach up to six courses in a semester, at times, at both the undergraduate and higher degree levels.

Suggestions for Achieving Increased Access to University Education

There can be increased access to university education, if stakeholders, especially the leadership of universities in Nigeria take the following bold steps;

1. Curbing of Financial Waste in Nigerian University System

It is well documented that the funds made available for universities is highly limited (Okebukola, 2008; Oraihi & Ebhohimen, 2011). For instance in 2004, the sum of N216, 622, 706, 206 (216 billion naira) was requested by the federally funded universities. The federal

government however released the sum 53, 466, 287, 848.61 (53 billion naira) representing 24.7% of the budget request from the universities (Federal Ministry of Education, 2009).

Despite the inadequate funding of universities, we still notice various areas of waste by the leadership of the universities, which if well harnessed can be effectively directed towards expansion of facilities to accommodate a larger number of students. The existence of several official vehicles, which some institutions brand as project vehicle, but used for private businesses do not augur well for the system. Even when these vehicles are most times used for private activities, they are fueled and maintained by their respective institutions. This in itself negates the principle of consolidation.

2. Downsize the Number of Support Staff in Nigerian University System

It is well reported that there is inadequate academic staff in number and quality in Nigeria University System. Most authorities of our universities complain of lack of funds for their inability to recruit more and competent academic staff. As already noted, this has led us to have 27,394 academic staff (as at 2006). But about 50,000 academic staff are required for effective course delivery across disciplines in the Nigerian University System. If funding is the issue, one is usually at a loss to observe that out of the total staff strength of Nigerian universities which is 99,464, less than 30% are academic staff.

It is a well known fact that the non-academic staff numbering 72,070 in the Nigerian University System does not contribute meaningfully to the realization of the goals of tertiary education, which primarily are teaching, research, community service dissemination of new and existing information and seeing a store house of knowledge.

If the number of non-teaching staff is considerably downsized, a huge amount can be directed to expand the facilities in our universities to accommodate more students.

3. Retraining of Academic Staff in NUS to Embrace ICT / e-Learning

As observed by Lu, Finley and McCormack (2009), within the key capacity building of education, it is teachers who make information alive and empower students, the leaders of tomorrow. With ICT, teachers are able to teach, communicate, maintain good records and evaluate any group.

ICT helps to enhance effective teaching, learning and research. It helps to reduce distances, virtually, if not physically thus providing greater access to and input into the world of international scholarship.

Presently, Aguele (2007) reports in his study that only 16% of Nigerian University lecturers indicated that they will use ICT tools in teaching, while 84% were uninterested in the integration of ICT in teaching and learning processes. Nigerian University System can increase ICT acceptance by making mandatory training in ICT a condition for career advancement among university academic staff.

If Nigerian universities lecturers become highly proficient in ICT and embrace online teaching, students can effectively receive lectures conveniently in their homes, even while relaxing. Thus, teaching and learning will not be restricted to classrooms wall. Through this process, there will be greater access to university education. Admission will no longer be

restricted to the immediate facilities, such as number of classrooms, lecturers or facilities which are now the immediate conditions for determining admission quota for respective universities.

4. Mandate all Universities to Establish Distance Learning Programs.

Federal Ministry of Education should through the NUC direct all universities in Nigeria to establish centers for distance learning, to provide opportunities for greater access to university education. These centers should produce materials (especially electronic) for use by students. Medium of instruction should be through electronic medium. Staff of these centers must be made to be highly computer literate and facilitate e-learning. This will provide a large number of students access to university education.

5. Revision of Education Trust Fund Support for Books and Journals Production.

The Education Trust Fund has initiated a project of providing financial assistance to institution and professional organizations in their production of books and journals. Good as this may sound, it is hereby advocated that such financial assistance should be directed to establishing distance learning centers, and production of online learning materials that would serve the greater populace that desire university education.

Conclusion

It is possible to achieve greater access to university education in Nigeria, if areas of waste are curbed and resources conserved are directed towards expanding the existing facilities to accommodate an increased number of students in Nigerian universities. Also with open and Distance Learning in our university a larger number can have access to university education.

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