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ANALYSIS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ADMISSION POLICY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of undergraduate students' admission policy in Nigeria from a post positivist's perspective. It is argued that universities ought to operate as a meritocratic institution and not a democratic one. Thus, the paper argues that the democratization of admission policy in Nigerian universities has outlived its relevance and needs to be ignored if the quality of input into the university system is not to be compromised.

Keywords: admission, centralization, democratization, merit, university education

Introduction

Access to education is one of the pillars of the current four year strategic plan of Federal Government of Nigeria in the education industry. University education represents a core component and is therefore given a prime place in the overall educational development of the country. For instance, proliferation of universities is often a clarion call among citizenry as a means of fostering access to university education.

In Nigeria, the expansion in university education seems to have improved access to and rectified educational imbalance across every part of the nation. Governments and private bodies play a prominent role in addressing the perceived university educational gap and neglect. Presently, the number of universities in Nigeria has increased to 129; which comprise 40 federally owned universities, 39 state owned universities, and 50 privately owned universities (see Table 1).

Table 1: List of Approved Universities in Nigeria as of May 2014

Geo-Political Zone	Federal	State	Private	Total
South-West	7	9	22	38
South-East	5	5	7	17
South-South	6	7	9	22
North-West	9	6	1	16
North-Central	7	7	9	23
North-East	6	5	2	13
Total	40	39	50	129

Source: NUC (2014) Database

From Table 1, it can be rightly inferred that “growth and development of universities in Nigeria has been tailored towards correction of educational imbalance among the States and for promoting national development” (Olayiwola, 2012, p. 33).

A powerful tool that determines access to university education is the admission policy. Government uses the admission policy as a control measure to determine the nature of students, who are the core input of the university system. Without the student body, the university becomes a research organization. In Nigeria, student admission policy is usually formulated by governmental bodies such as National Universities Commission (NUC) and Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) to address the problem of access to university education. It therefore becomes imperative to examine the entry requirements. The assumption is that the quality of entrants (students) contributes greatly to the overall attainment of the goals of university education.

The history of imbalance in Nigerian university education started in 1948 with the establishment of the University College, Ibadan (UCI), an affiliate of London University, in the southwestern part of Nigeria. As at 1970, three universities had been established in the south-west, one in south-south, one in south-east, one in north-west, none in the north-central and none in the north-east geo-political zones of Nigeria. As at 2014, there were 38 universities in south-west, 17 universities in south-east, 22 universities in south-south, 16 universities in north-west, 23 universities in north-central and 13 universities in the north-eastern part of the country. Generally, it appears that

the south-west geo-political zone has a comparative advantage over other geo-political zones of the country in terms of access to university education based on locality area or catchment opportunity. The catchment area is the geographical area in which a university is situated. In the catchment area, residents from the area are given special consideration based on the admissions quota allotted for catchment area. The catchment area for Nigerian universities is usually determined based on geographical location and historical factor. Generally, catchment area is determined by the facilities available such as road network, the boundaries of administrative areas as well as political exigencies that are present in a country. This locational difference among different geo-political zones of the country appears to be the beginning of the problem of access to university education in Nigeria.

The imbalance in setting up university across the geo-political zones of Nigeria necessitated the democratisation and centralisation of admission process in order to ensure that education serves as a tool for national integration. The rationale is to promote equal educational opportunity at the university level. A central national agency was established in 1962, named the National Universities Commission (NUC), and part of its functions is to regulate the student admission process. The NUC determines the admission quota for each participating university at a given admission period based on the university's carrying capacity. The admission quota for each university is forwarded to another national body, the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) for its implementation. Ojerinde (2011) pointed out that NUC provides "admission quotas to guide the Board and the institutions concerned in the joint selection exercise" (p. 499). This admission process is highly centralised and requires total compliance from participating universities in Nigeria.

Before the establishment of JAMB, each of the then existing six universities in Nigeria admitted its own students directly based on entry requirements without any uniform matriculation examination. In such admission process, there were two categories of students: preliminary and direct entry students. Akinola (2003) noted that preliminary students would write a preliminary examination to be conducted by the university and then would be short-listed for university admission based on the level of their performance in the examination. According to Akinola, direct entry students were given admission based on their performance in the General Certificate Examination of the University of London at the Advanced Level, General Certificate Examination Ordinary Level, or Higher School Certificate Examination. Consequently, problem of multiple offers to students from different universities, multiple application fees to two or more universities, and resultant shortfalls in enrolment were recurring emergent issues in the admission process. For example, Ojerinde (2011) noted that records obtained from the NUC indicated 9.5% shortfall in the enrolment of the budgeted university admission places between 1970 and 1975. According to Ojerinde, a panel was set up by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors to:

- examine the existing system of admission into Nigerian universities;
- identify the problems and shortcomings arising from the system; and
- make appropriate recommendations without prejudice to the existing individual standards and traditions of the various universities. (Ojerinde, 2011, p. 497).

The recommendation of the panel led to the setting up of JAMB as a statutory body for the conduct of uniform matriculation examination for all universities in Nigeria. JAMB was established by an Act (No. 2 of 1978) of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria on 13th February, 1978. On April 29, 1978, the first national matriculation examination took place and candidates were placed in the then existing universities based on their level of performance in the examination and its expressed preferences for universities.

The functions of JAMB as indicated in the Act No. 33 of 1989 and Act No. 4 of 1993 of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria are:

- the placement of suitably qualified candidates into tertiary institutions after having taking into account: the vacancies available in each tertiary institution; the guidelines approved for each tertiary institution by its proprietor or any other competent authority; the preferences expressed for certain institution; and such other matters as the Board may be directed by the Minister to consider or the Board itself may consider appropriate in the circumstance; and
- the collection and dissemination of information on all matters relating to admissions into tertiary institutions or to any other matter relevant to the functions of the Board. (Ojerinde, 2011, pp. 496 - 503).

In other words, JAMB as a central body was established to entrench the uniform admission process in Nigeria.

Ojerinde (2011) stated that admissions into federal institutions “must be based on 45% merit, 35% for the catchment area, and 20% for the Educationally Less-Developed States (ELDS)” (p. 498). According to Ojerinde, 23 States of the Federation are categorized as ELDS. States of the Federation have been categorized into educationally advantaged and disadvantaged on the basis of disparities in university admissions. Ojerinde further stated that “catchment area criterion is supposed to take care of the candidates who could not meet the merit cut-off points but whose States of origin are contiguous to the university in question” (p. 498). It is the responsibility of each participating university to determine its own cut-off scores for each category. This kind of admission process is democratic.

The democratisation of the admission process means that residents of each geo-political zone of the country are carried along in university education. To ensure this admission process, a uniform admission policy was established by JAMB. The uniform admission policy is a major impediment to qualitative university education in Nigeria. Comprehensively, Akinola (2003) noted that:

... problem of UME [Universities Matriculation Examination] policy is the preferential and/or differential policy that designates certain parts of the country as disadvantaged areas. This policy is political in nature, and should be discontinued. This policy too has given many of our children, who would have been admitted but could not, due to the policy, a lot of frustrations, seeing those who scored less than them being admitted. It is indeed unfair to the prospective students in some parts of the country, with higher scores in the UME, not to be given admission into the university, while others in the so-designated disadvantaged areas with lower scores have the opportunity of being admitted. This, indeed, is academic apartheid in disguise. (p. 4).

Invariably, the JAMB admission policy is an attempt to stem the tide of educational advancement in one part of Nigeria so that the other parts of the country could meet up and remedy the educational imbalance among each other. In a case of no candidates from a specified geo-political zone for admission process, then difficulties would arise. For example, Ojerinde (2011) stated that “some institutions may have problem with admission guidelines, such as, no candidates from their immediate environment on the merit list and would have difficulty in filling their admissions quota” (p. 509).

Policy Framework

The paper presents an analysis of student admission policy from postpositivist’s perspective. The contextuality and presupposition theory within the five theory streams of policy analysis is considered appropriate to the philosophical arguments of the paper. To ascertain the rationale behind the contextuality and presupposition theories, the positivist policy analysts assume that policy problems exist independently and can be identified and solved objectively. It is generally noted that the failures of positivist policy analytic theory and practice on policy problems led to the surge of the postpositivist critique. For instance, Morcol (2005) stated that “positivist policy analysis attempts to keep the respective realm of politics and analysis apart, on the basis of the belief that while values belong to politics, facts should be the domain of analysis” (p. 217). Policy simply refers to authoritative allocation of values. Hence, the political dimension to policy research cannot be ignored. Alternatively, the positivist principle of fact-value dichotomy is not justified.

Alternative to positivism according to this paper is the contextuality and presupposition theory of post-positivism policy analysis. The proponents of contextuality and presupposition theory argue that the theory and practice of policy analysis are positivistic. The theorists further argued that “policy-analytic knowledge is presupposed-mediated by analysts’ preconceived notions and values-and formed in historical, cultural, and political contexts” (Morcol, 2005, pp. 218 – 219). In this paper, the identified policy problem is democratisation of student admission process in a meritocratic institution. From postpositivist’s philosophical perspective, the policy problem arises based on the fact that a university is a meritocratic institution and not a democratic one. The values refer to allotment of certain percentage on three categories for admission process. In other words, admission quota for

each participating university stipulates 45% on merit, 35% on catchment area, and 20% on educationally less-developed states. In the policy process, postpositivists argued that facts and values are intertwined. This calls for a common basis for a valid discourse.

Generally, the traditional areas of academic freedom for the university are admission of students, appointment and promotion of staff, teaching and research areas, and determination of course content. For instance, universities should exercise unreserved rights on who become its members. In Nigeria, the practice of admission policy by NUC and JAMB in collaboration with 129 universities is seriously endangering academic freedom. Admission quota is being introduced as a derivative of carrying capacity for each university. There is need for total compliance on admission guidelines unless punitive measures such as delay in government subvention will occur, graduates of erring universities will not participate in National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), and others are being enforced.

Implications of the Policy Framework

Studies have shown that the existing uniform admission policy contributes negatively to qualitative university education in Nigeria. For example, Adeyemi (2001) found a significant difference in the quality of performance of students admitted on merit and those admitted through catchment area of admission policy. He also reported that the drop-out and repetition rate for the latter group was three times higher than for the merit-based group. In sum, the wastage rate of those on merit group was lower than those through catchment area group. Adeyemi (2001) therefore asserted that when merit is underemphasized in the admission process, “quality may be substituted with mediocrity just to balance access to university education” (p. 329). Apart from the empirical study, Oni (2000) had earlier argued that admissions based on quotas rather than merit is one of the external factors responsible for the poor quality of university programmes in Nigerian universities. The overall effect of the uniform admission policy or admission quota system is institutionalisation of mediocrity in the university system.

Based on Adeyemi’s (2001) findings, it was suggested that the uniform admission policy should be retained, but fine-tuned so as to effectively serve as a measure through which the imbalance in university education could be minimized and increased access to university education by the various groups in the country could be assured. Ojerinde (2011) also pointed out that “the existing quota system of admission should be reviewed with the provision that the merit percentage be increased to accommodate the best candidates from each State in the Federation” (p. 512).

Following the history of uniform admission policy in Nigeria, the first post-independence commission on post-secondary and higher education in the country, popularly referred to as Ashby Commission of 1960 proposed a uniform admission policy for all the universities based on merit without discriminating against any region or tribe, but warned that:

... borders between Regions must never become barriers to the migration of brains. Nigeria’s intellectual life, and her economy, will suffer unless there is free migration of both staff and students from one Region to another. We know that we are echoing the convictions of Nigerian leaders when we say that one of the purposes of education in this country is to promote cohesion between her Regions. Universities should be a powerful instrument for this purpose: it is their duty to respond”. (Ashby Commission Report, 1960, p. 68).

The second and last commission on higher education in Nigeria was the Longe Commission of 1990. One of the terms of reference of the commission is to “review the admission requirements for post-secondary and higher educational institutions and advise changes where necessary” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992, p. 4). Higher education in this context is the university. A part of the recommendations is that “there should be a reduction of the percentage allocation to quota in favour of meritocracy spread over a defined period. By an agreed date, for example, 2000 A.D., this geographical concession should be completely discontinued” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1992, p. 44). In the technical report, the projected timetable for admission formula is:

Table 2: Timetable for Uniform Admission Policy

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000
Merit	40	50	55	60	65	70
Catchment Area	30	25	25	25	20	20
Disadvantaged States	20	15	10	5	5	-
Discretionary (including foreign students)	10	10	10	10	10	10
Total Percentage	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria (1992)

Consequently, government rejected the above timetable. Notwithstanding the place of merit in the admission process is being accorded a prime position.

Conclusion

University education plays a powerful role in national development, most especially on human resource development. The paper analyses the democratisation of access to university education through geographical distribution of universities and introduction of quotas in the admission process. The paper argues that the current uniform admission policy was introduced when Nigerian universities were not well-distributed across the geo-political zones of the country. The quota system of admission, a derivative of carrying capacity for each university, was introduced to correct the imbalance in university educational attainment across the geo-political zones of Nigeria. Materu, Obanya, and Righetti (2011) noted that quota system was intended to ensure equity and fairness in the admission process for Nigerian universities. The debate in the equity and fairness of the admission process is to the large community (society) where the university derives its inputs (students), but it appears that there is inequity and unfairness to the entire academic community (school) where merit seems to be the order of the day. On the part of the large community (Nigeria), the establishment of 129 universities well-distributed across every part of the country has taken care of the issue on university educational imbalance and access to university education in general. Hence, there is the need for equity and fairness in the admission process in order to promote qualitative university education in Nigeria. In sum, universities need to admit students based on merit on the quota stipulated by NUC and JAMB as the central governmental bodies. It should be noted that the quality of university graduates is a derivative of the quality of the students' intake. Overall, the main purpose of university education is intellectual development and meritocracy is the only legitimate factor upon which such purpose can be enhanced.

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