

## **The Quota Policy in Nigerian Education System: An Emasculation of Meritocracy Among Nigerian Students**

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### ***Abstract***

*Government in an effort to bridge the educational gap between the educationally developed states and the educationally less developed states, introduced the quota system of admission into federal universities in Nigeria. But whenever this quota system of admission is mentioned, Nigeria is polarized into consensus apostles and dissenting factions. While some call it an equity formula, others consider it inequitable because the conduct of students' admission procedure seems to be devoid of equity and merit system. This paper therefore examines the concept of quota system, quota system in the education sector, the limitations of quota system, entronement of mediocrity and an emasculation of meritocracy, conclusion and recommendations.*

Universally, education is regarded as the bedrock of human total development. At the university level, education serves as the bases on which the needed high level manpower for a nation's development could be nurtured. Odekule (2001) posits that universities prepare future teachers and develop the high level manpower capacities that under pin the economic social and political growth and development of any given nation. A university according to Okujagu (2009) is a storehouse of retrievable knowledge and has functions which include authorship and publication of standard texts, self-sustenance, creation of a model community in efficiency, probity and tolerance, honest, and enlightened commentary on public affairs in order to impartially educate and to inform. Therefore, the extent to which universities achieve these lofty objectives depends to a very large extent on the quality of candidates offered admission by the National University Commission (NUC). According to National University Commission (2012), university admission is the legitimate gate way through which qualified citizens get enrolled for university education in Nigeria. Therefore, the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) as a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Education is saddled with the responsibility of selecting candidates for university education through their prescribed examination as a basic requirement.

Among the controversial practices of the federal government in recent times is the extensive educational assistance by way of extra funding to those states designated "educationally disadvantaged" Many observers see this as promotion of sectional interest rather than furthering the spirit of independence and national brotherhood it purported to be serving. A lot seemingly apparent good reasonings make – belief arguments, statistics and spurious logic have been put forward to justify this policy.

In reference to this, Jacobs (1990) contended that "those states which encountered Western education later than others but made good use of the opportunity should not now be victims of their industry and foresight". It is common conviction in Nigeria that the disparity in education between the North and South of the country is as a result of difference in political awareness and economic disparity between the two areas. The average Nigerian believes that to attain an enviable height both in the economic sector and social status, education must be put into consideration. Policy makers on their own, believe that imbalance of all sorts would vanish in our country if 'educational opportunities' are provided. To get these reasoning and belief work out, a lot of schemes were tried and others are in existence among which are the concept of 'educationally disadvantaged' differential funding of institutions of learning by the government, 'quota system' catchment area' et cetera.

Efforts to run away from the debacles of tribe and religion have made the politicians, educational administrators and policy makers in Nigeria to coin a euphemism of federal character' in admissions into schools, appointment to offices and resource allocation. For the implementation of the 'federal character' to succeed another

*The Quota Policy in Nigerian Education System: An Emasculation of Meritocracy among Nigerian Students*  
euphemism called ‘quota system’ must be applied. Quota in this context means a number of people that should come from each state: it is immaterial whether or not such candidates qualify for such posts or honours. This is the major reason admissions into federal government owned institutions of learning have come to be by way of ‘federal character’ and ‘quota system’.

According to Bamisaiya in Okonkwo (1991:117) the following guidelines were approved as a means of reflecting federal character in admission to federal universities:

1. “The six, first generation Universities of Ibadan, Nigeria, Lagos, Ahmadu Bello, Ife (Obafemi Awolowo University) and Benin;
  - a. 40% on merit from all the states of the Federation
  - b. 30% from the catchment areas
  - c. 20% for students from educationally less developed states
  - d. 10% for others at the discretion of the university
2. For the second generation Nigerian Universities of Calabar, Illorin, Jos, Kano Maiduguri, Port Harcourt and Sokoto;
  - a. 30% no merit from all the states of the federation
  - b. 30% for students from the catchment area.
  - c. 30% for students from educationally disadvantaged areas.
  - d. 10% for others at the discretion of the University.
3. The third generation of Universities in Nigeria, the Federal Universities of Technology;
  - a. 20% from the catchment areas
  - b. 80% at the discretion of the University.

Bringing all the criteria for admission into Federal institutions of learning, other than merit together, merit is the least. The question then arises as to whether this is the way excellence for development can be achieved. This tends to approximate University education to basic education which every person will benefit from.

Government in an effort to bridge the educational gap introduced the quota system and catchment area policies. However whenever these policies are raised, Nigeria is polarized into consensus apostles and dissenting factions. While some call it an equity formula, others consider it inequitable because the conduct of students’ admission procedure seems to be devoid of equity and merit system. It has also been observed that quota are filled and examination grades are manipulated in favour of some students because of their state of origin.

### **The Concept of Quota System**

The quota system represents the number of candidates that should be admitted into the university in one academic year from each state. The Webster’s third New international Dictionary defines “Quota” as the share or proportion received, granted or necessary to a person as being one of a certain number assigned to ‘party’ (eg an institution with a quoted admission policy). On the other hand, the international Dictionary of Education defines quota system as any selection method (for *Journal of Resourcefulness and Distinction, Volume 16 No. 1, November, 2018: ISSN 2276-9684* 207

*Okoh Fredrick Nweneazizi; Vincent Ebeigbe and P. Egwuelu*  
~~employment, school admission etc) whereby a certain set percentage of those selected~~  
must be of a given ethnic or racial background and /or of particular sex. However, from which ever dimension one views the policy, two words ring a bell-inequity or inequality and equity or equality. The social consequences the policy produce include conscious or unconscious rejection of specific social groups which are the results of decisions as to what opportunities are to be offered by the society, to whom they are to be offered, who is selected to fill them and who does the selections.

### **Quota System in the Education Sector**

At present, the most widely recognized gap and the most politically sensitive talking point in Nigeria is the educational imbalance between the Southern and Northern states of the country, Nduka (1974) observed that the Southern states which had been historically more responsive to Western Christian influences and education have made more educational progress than the predominantly Moslem Northern States, where the Christian influence was to a large extent rejected. The effect of this rejection can be noticeable in the imbalance which is not only reflected in the primary level but also both secondary and tertiary levels of education.

A university is different from other academic institutions because its preoccupation is not only in the diffusion of knowledge but its extension. The university yearns for truth and subjects existing body of knowledge to critical examination and analysis to see if it needs revision. As centre for excellence universities are also expected to set the pace for the large society in the efficient and effective management of human and material resources.

The problem of admissions into Nigerian universities and the maintenance of adequate standard have been associated with some unpopular policies adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria to address the inadequacy in the number of admission places in the university system. Among the unpopular polices included;

- i. Backwardness factor policy that ensured a certain percentage of admission chances was reserved for the states considered to be educationally disadvantaged or backward.
- ii. Catchment area policy which provided that a certain percentage of admission places must be reserved for the indigenes of the areas in which universities are located.
- iii. Quota system policy provided the allocation of certain percentages of admission places into Nigerian universities based on populations, ethnic consideration and states of origin.
- iv. Discriminatory fees policy provided for lower fees to be paid by the indigenes of the localities where universities are established.

Akani (1996) posits that the above policies resulted in the reduction of admission standards and this allowed poorly qualified candidates to be admitted into Nigerian Universities. This is because the policy conferred on the various categories of persons the right of admission whether qualified or not. Akani further noted that the quality of university education in Nigeria has consequently been lowered as a result of

*Journal of Resourcefulness and Distinction, Volume 16 No. 1, November, 2018: ISSN 2276-9684 208*

*The Quota Policy in Nigerian Education System: An Emasculation of Meritocracy among Nigerian Students*

~~the federal Government admission policies which apparently de-emphasize quality.~~ Oduwaiye (2011) warned that much as it is good that the educationally disadvantaged area is being encouraged, it should not be at the detriment of others in a situation where a candidate does not gain access just because of his birth place which is not too good. Enemuo (2004) argued that the policy encourages social discrimination of one group against the other. He maintained that the quota system in all its ramifications is the practice of favouring some candidates at the expense of others in the university admission on the basis of state of origin, local government area, tribe, nepotism or choice of course of study. Enemuo further pointed out that the application of the quota system to students' admission denies meritorious candidates admission into the universities.

The quota admission system portrays that a candidate from the Southern state with university matriculation examination scores of 300 out of 400 may not get admission into the university but his/her counterpart from the North with a lower score may be admitted. Similarly a candidate with 280 score out of 400 from educationally advanced states may not get admission but his/her counterpart from educationally disadvantaged state with lower score may be admitted.

Thus quota system has created inequality in the provision of university education and equity has been sacrificed on the alter of quota system of admission. Some candidates with better scores are denied admission on grounds of indigene and non-indigene dichotomy. A candidate for admission should not be made to suffer greater burden than the other simply because of his place of birth and locality (Dada, 2004).

### **Limitations of the Quota System**

Admission into institutions should be strictly based on merit instead of on the idea of balancing imbalances in education at the expense of merit. This cardinal objective of balancing national imbalances has conferred some limitations on the quota system: These include:

1. Merit is sacrificed on the altar of federal character and ethnic balancing. The implication is clear. Mediocres are offered admission into Universities.
2. It has political intentions more than educational intentions.
3. Well qualified students are deprived the opportunity to have education, all in the name of the quota system.
4. It has made the institutions become more of center of ethnic patronage than of academic excellence.
5. It created the ugly impression that a particular section of the country must stop or slow down educational pursuit for the other section to catch up with her or even surpass her. This is a dangerous trend in a supposedly egalitarian society where no one should be oppressed or suppressed.
5. The general public will also suffer from the effect of quota system. This should be expected because where the never-do-wells under the umbrella of quota find

*Okoh Fredrick Nwenearizi; Vincent Ebeigbe and P. Egwuelu*

~~places in our higher institutions, the fact remains that they may graduate without learning much. They will go into the society for job and secure it under quota as no doubt. The long term effect of this is that at the place of works, initiative will be lacking and creativity zero.~~

6. It is pretty obvious that the philosophy, the rationale behind the establishment of government schools in Nigeria is already set at nought and the noble national objectives of our educational system set forth in the National Policy on education (2004), namely using education as instrument par excellence for building ‘a just and egalitarian society and promotion of the emotional, physical and psychological health of all children’ there are now put on the line for whoever has the power to define what justice means.

### **Enthronement of Mediocrity and an Emasculation of Meritocracy**

University is not a place for basic education where everyone is expected to go. It is a place for specialties. Therefore common sense dictates that whoever thinks of going to the University must demonstrate ability and competence in order to be there. If ‘quota system’ can be tolerated any where, it is not in the University where research and excellence are emphasized. The practice of ‘quota system’ has actually killed the competition needed to get into our institutions of learning. Thus Osuagwu in Onwuka (1997:82) stated that:

*Meritocracy has for long been emasculated in this country through the quota system syndrome. The superciliousness and craftiness of our policy maker, who support and - implement this policy is exposed in their inability to bring up this melancholy as a phase in the WAI crusade. This willful omission is a serious indictment of those public officers who peddle ingenuity in the knowledge of the problems of Nigeria.*

In the light of this, Ngoka in Onwuka (1997) posited that “the quota system of admission into Nigerian Universities is a serious abuse of the law of academic excellence “. If mediocres are admitted into schools in the uncontrolled bid to represent federal character, the products of such schools are bound to be mediocres. Our education system therefore calls urgent over-haul. Common sense demands that in a matter like education upon which the future development of the nation depends, merit should be given priority in admitting pupils into the school system.

Any society like ours that scorns merit and accepts mediocres may at the end lose all her competent scholars and geniuses. Hence Okafor in Onwuka (1997: 84) scholarly maintained that education in Africa especially Nigeria is obviously dwindling. It has ceased to be an instrument for human development and has turned to be an instrument for achieving nothing, he warned:

Inspite of the African hurry for education and development, care must be taken not to allow for any diminution of standards and quality. Africans cannot afford to institutionalize Mediocrity in the public school system (‘as has happed in some non-African counties) or to adopt polices that would be scholastically questionable. The

***The Quota Policy in Nigerian Education System: An Emasculation of Meritocracy among Nigerian Students***  
tradition of stringent requirements for moving from one academic level to another must be maintained.

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It is not through the concept of “Federal Character” or “quota system” whose aim is to assemble mediocres in our institutions of learning that we can improve the quality of the end-product of education. There is need to recruit potential’ scholars and not potential mercenaries. To do this, giving merit its proper place in our society does the job. It should not be done by way of equal number of bringing children from all the states of the federation before we can make effort to support fully the talented children who in future will make this country proud.

‘Quota system’ when practiced is considered bad because people must suffer from it. Those at the borderlines are always affected seriously. This is so, because they find themselves being rejected by virtue of coming from advantaged states’. For example, if a cut-off point in admission is 270 based on merit in the faculty of Medicine, Somebody who scored 269 may be rejected cause he is from ‘advantaged’ state while someone with 250 will be accepted because he is from ‘educationally disadvantaged’ state. This is unfair because merit is not accorded acceptance. In a study carried out by Nwana (1988) it was discovered that many students were admitted in our secondary and post- secondary institutions first on basis of quota irrespective of their performance at the common entrance examination. This practice will no doubt, reduce the predictive validity of selection measures. The question then arise: what is the need spending much money conducting entrance examination and Joint Matriculation Examinations, only to use some other criteria not directly related in admitting people into institutions of learning? The answer is any person’s guess. But bearing in mind that University institutions are first and foremost set up for academic excellence, it is wise that Universities get involved fully in admission of candidates into the Universities in order to enable them select only those who are academically fit. Buttressing this point, Briggs in Ukwu (1987:147) maintained that:

*The Universities and whatever central organization that may be set up for the purposes of determining the national minimum standards would have to agree upon the relative proportions of candidates that should be admitted on the basis of academic excellence. This is important in order to ensure that the cream of candidates most qualified for university education are screened on the basis of individual merit.*

In the light of this therefore, it stands to reason that there is no short-cut to excellence. Rather than the enthronement of mediocrity and an emasculation of meritocracy among Nigerian students through these obnoxious polices as ‘quota system’ ‘educationally disadvantaged’ federal character etc. there is need to use stringent measures in admitting candidates in our institutions of higher learning.

### **Conclusion**

One key area in the Nigerian educational system that requires urgent reforms is the quota system. The quota system that reserves an agreed percentage of admission opportunities for states that are educationally backward gives room for the acceptance

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standard. Again, the catchment area policy which allocates an agreed percentage of admission places to candidates from the locality of the university is a factor for the reduction of the quality of university education. This is because some of the candidates admitted based on this policy do not usually meet the minimum requirements. More so, the use of discretionary policy for the admission of university students can often lead to abuse by facilitating the acceptance of low quality candidates as students. The effect of such a practice will be the reduction of the quality of education.

### **Recommendations**

To address the issue of quota system in respect of education imbalance in Nigeria, the following measures have been recommended to strengthen the capability of the 'disadvantaged states' to enable them compete effectively with the 'advantaged states'. These include:

1. The expansion of their educational facilities such as primary and post primary institutions.
2. Development of remedial education for all.
3. Intensification of education guidance counseling.
4. Strict enforcement of full term of compulsory schooling.
5. A massive programme of teacher education in the states concerned.
6. Pupils, students and adult learners of different abilities should be identified and provided for.
7. A programme of public enlightenment of parents in those areas may be necessary in order to drive home to them the need for education for their children.
8. The "disadvantaged states" should stop treating teachers recruited from the same avowed country-Nigeria as mercenaries. If they offer such teachers what is due to them, and make them feel at home, a good service will be gotten from the teachers. The problem of imbalance in education may be reduced in the near future if these suggestions are implemented.

It may be difficult at the beginning but it will be far better than the current practice whereby students who perform poorly in examination are pushed to the Universities because they come from educationally disadvantaged' areas. The outcome of this will only go to quicken the decline in the standard of education.

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*The Quota Policy in Nigerian Education System: An Emasculation of Meritocracy among Nigerian Students*

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