

ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: ISSUES AND TRENDS

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Abstract

The National policy on Education has provided conditions to encourage access to education. It further states that maximum efforts will be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it. Regrettably, Nigeria public has been expressing dissatisfaction with the admission into the university education now that there is massive awareness of the significance of university education in the development of the individual and the nation. Access to university education is a thorny issue in Nigeria today. This paper examined the challenges to access to university education such as inadequate funding and leadership recklessness, lack of absorption capacity, quota/catchment areas among others. The paper recommended that more federal universities be established, with adequate funding, adequate facilities/equipment should be provided. The issue of catchment area/quota system should be reviewed to create room for merit. The paper concluded that for Nigeria to join other nations of the world in pursuing sustainable development, human capital development should be the focus.

Keywords: Access, University, Education.

Education is an indispensable tool for enhancing socio-economic, political and cultural development of any nation; and as such cannot be undermined. However, one of the fundamental challenges of our time is to get more people better educated and get most of them through post-secondary education. Access to education has been

a thorny issue at both higher and lower levels of education. The role education generally and more especially higher education plays in facilitating the growth and development of a country's economy is significant (Ajayi & Ekundayo. 2008). The National Policy on Education (2014), highlighted the goal of university education as follows:

To contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training.

To develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society.

To develop the intellectual capability of an individual to understand and appreciate the local and external environment.

To acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enables individuals to be self reliable and useful member of the society.

To promote and encourage scholarship and community service.

To forge and cement national unity.

To promote national and international understanding and interaction (FR,N, 2014 p.2).

The increasing importance of higher education as a means of strengthening the economy and availing the individual has intensified the demand for university education in Nigeria over the last twenty years. However, Nigerian higher education has not been able to meet the demand for broadening College admission (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2008). Making higher education accessible to every Nigerian should therefore be a top priority.

There is no gain saying the fact that acquisition of education, most especially university education is essentially important and useful to man. This is because university education is fundamental to the construction of a knowledge economy and society in all nations. It is to this end that Ehiamentalor (2005) argued that there seems to be a general perception among Nigerian people that only university degree can promise good future. According to him, the demand for university education has reached an unprecedented high level that more than double the current number of universities in the country will be required to fill this end. Thus, Nigeria citizens who are qualified to receive university education should be provided with opportunity to do so without hindrance.

Access to education is the opportunity to participate in education sector whether formal or informal (Ehiamentalor, 2005). The rate of enrolment at the different levels of primary, secondary, and tertiary levels are important indices of development. At tertiary levels, admission into Colleges of education, Polytechnics and universities has been through the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). JAMB was established to perform this duty right from 1978. The federal government/JAMB guidelines for admission to the federal, state and private universities is meant to provide equitable access to federal, state universities based on academic merit, residential zones, or other government policies. In this regard some of the most competent students who have great potential are denied admission because of

geographical constraints, discretion or over emphasis on science major as opposed to the arts. This situation has grave effects on the students and parents who have to face many challenges in securing admission. There are public outcries because of small percentage of admission year in year out.

The thrust of this paper is to examine access to university education in Nigeria in the last five years; examine current challenges to providing increased access to university education in Nigeria; and try to proffer solutions toward achieving increased access to university education in Nigeria.

Meaning of Access to Education

Access to education implies making “it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it” Education Sector Analysis (EFA 2003:p.6). Access to education reflects the universal declaration of Human Right which asserted that everyone has a right to education. This access to education provides a guarantee for everyone entitled to education to receive it. It means rights, opportunity or means of making education available within the reach of every citizens of nation. (Enaohwo, 2008). Okeke (2009) asserted that access to education means free, unlimited/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.

Lack of access to education on the other hand means, failing to enroll in an educational institution. Lack of opportunity to attend school regularly; does not complete prescribed programme of study; does not have opportunities required to attain the desired goals; and lack of opportunity to transit to the next level of education. Access to education therefore means the extent to which people have access/gain/unhindered opportunities to acquire university education in Nigeria. Access to university education therefore, implies making it possible for everyone that deserves university education receives it.

UNESCO (2003) look at access to tertiary education as ensuring equitable access to tertiary education based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance. The communiqué of Gender Budgeting Initiative (2003) highlighted the importance of access to education as both a need (one which is necessary for the fulfillment of an individual & personhood) and also strategies needs (that which will yield access to other opportunities such as health, employment and political awareness). Nation’s Gross National Product (GNP) per capital depends to a large extent, on the level of development of its human resources. This calls for rapid, good but rational development of the university education. This implies that accessibility to university education should be given priority in Nigeria as a developing country.

An Overview of Access to University Education in Nigeria from 2011-2015

We have stated earlier that access to university education is the extent to which people have access to or unhindered opportunity to pursue university education in Nigeria. We have done here a situational analysis of access to university education between 2011 to 2015 for better understanding of the experiences of students and parents in their struggle to gain admission into university. Ajayi and Adeniji (2009) opined that in order to underscore the phenomenal development that has taken place in university education in the recent years, the picture of demand and supply of university education in Nigeria is necessary.

Table 1. Demand and Supply of University Education in Nigeria from 2011 – 2015

YEAR	APPLICATIONS	ADMISSION	%	TOTAL UNPLACED	%
2011	1,575,522	1,928,09	12.2	1,382,743	87.5
2012	1,452,874	386308	26.5	1,066,566	73.1
2013	1,668,224	262,510	15.7	1,405,714	84
2014	1,576,257	359,559	22.8	1,216,658	77.2
2015	1,424,628	384,442	26.9	1,040,186	73.1

Source: computed by Author from JAMB Annual Report 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015.

Table 2: List of Universities in Nigeria

Proprietorship	Universities
Federal	46
State	40
Private	61
Total	157

Source: <http://www.nuc.edu.ng/pages/universities.asp>:NUC website, 2017

The statistics of demand and supply of access to the 147 universities in the country from 2011 - 2015 shows a worrisome situation. In the statistics above, it is

sad to note that universities were only able to accommodate 12.2%, 26.5%, 15.7%, and 26.9% in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2015 respectively of the qualified candidates prepared by JAMB.

The Higher Education Participation Rate (HEPR) defined as the proportion rate of 18-35 age group as enrolled in tertiary institutions in Nigeria is just 8.1%. This is very low when compared with developed countries like USA, Australia, and Korea that have 64%, 41% and 51% HEPR respectively (Damel Kawan & Uvalic Trubic, 2006). This assertion confirmed that the level of access to education in Nigeria is less than the 40 percent recommended ratio for any nation to make appreciable impact on the economy (UNESCO, 2010).

In the past, the numbers of universities in the country were few and candidates seeking admission were equally few. However, the importance placed on higher education by successive government and the EFA 2000 declaration, the Dakar Frame Work and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) appears to account for why the demand for university education surge up. According to JAMB (2012) every year, about a million or more candidates apply to enroll into institutions but barely 10% or little more of them actually secure admission.

The government has always tried to increase the number of tertiary institutions to accommodate the yearning of citizens for higher education, despite the increase in number of universities shown in Table 2, the universities have not been able to absorb the growing demand which may be as a result of broader access to primary and secondary education. This has raised a lot of concern about the teeming population of youths who were unable to get admission into the universities.

Issues of Access to University Education in Nigeria

The problems of access to university education in Nigeria are multifarious in nature. It is not just the question of establishing more universities in the Nigeria, as remedy to inadequate access to university education. There are numbers of issues to be examined if adequate access to university education can be achieved. These are:

Underfunding of Universities

One of the greatest challenges that Nigeria universities have faced over the years is gross underfunding resulting from poor budgeting allocation to education sector to match with the population growth and demand for higher education. Funding for whatever purpose is often next to planning. It could make or mar a project. University education requires sufficient funding in order to provide and maintain basic levels of infrastructure. Basically, the Federal Ministry of Education is expected to adequately cater for 46 Federal Universities, 25 Federal Polytechnics, 22 Federal Colleges of Education and 104 Federal Unity Schools. Looking at the dwindling budgetary allocation to education sector for the last six years, one can definitely infer the implication on the university funding.

Table 3: Budgetary Allocation to Education Sector from 2012 – 2017

2012	400.15 billion
2013	426.53 billion
2014	493 billion
2015	492 billion
2016	369.6 billion
2017	546.13 billion

Source: www.vanguardngr.com

Even though we have noticed an appreciable increase in budgetary allocation to education for 2017, it still remains and fell short of the 26% MDGs and NEEDS requirement. Access to university education entails funding because the more funds are made available to provide facilities and infrastructure and other basic needs, the more opportunities for access to higher education.

The Problem of Absorption Capacity/Inadequate Number of University

This 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 the recent year admission into Nigeria universities. Secondly, the inadequate number of universities and insufficient carrying capacity of the university to cope with the high demand for university education has put much pressure on university admission (Ohukurah, 2011). The entire absorption capacity of the university system in Nigeria can only comfortably accommodate about 20% of those seeking admission. For example, out of 6,229,535 candidates who sought admission to university between 2011-2015, only 1,519,449 representing 24.1% were given admission (JAMB Annual Report 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015).

Okoroma (2008) noted that insufficiency in the number of universities in Nigeria, coupled with great demand for the university education has created the problem of admission into the available universities and its impact on education standard.

Lack of Adequate Facilities Provided by Universities

The provision of educational facilities is crucial to bringing education to the doorstep of all. The inadequate provision of human and material resources as well as

instructional facilities due to poor funding resulted in the formation of the principles of faculty carrying capacity which stipulates that admission of students should be based on available facilities and classroom, staff, laboratory, equipment and materials (Ene, 2007). The conspicuous absence of adequate and qualified teachers, lack of classrooms, furniture and instructional facilities virtually in most schools throughout the country is a challenge to access and qualitative education. Nwaeke (2006) posits that the school facilities constitute the essential requirement for effective functioning of the school system. They have to be purchased and installed or constructed, serviced and maintained to have used life span. These are necessary for access to university education.

Federal Government Policy on Education

Another issue that hampers access to university education is the policy of the 60:40 ratio of admission to the sciences and liberal arts discipline respectively in the universities and the 70:30 ratio in Polytechnics (Okebukola, 2000, Igogwu, 2004 and Otoegbu, 2010). The rationale behind this policy is that the country needs more scientists in all sectors of the country, especially in oil industries and for economic development and transformation. The implication of this ratio is that many qualified liberal arts students are denied admission because of the slots reserved for arts are not enough to admit the majority of applicants. Let us look at table 4 candidate’s admission into universities across disciplines from 2012 – 2015.

Table 4: Candidates Admission into Nigeria Universities across Disciplines.

Year	Admin	Agric	Arts	Edu.	En/Tech/ Design	Law	Med.	Social sciences	science
2012	42,923	8,914	32,250	24,648	59,255	21,882	54,759	64,206	77,471
2013	21,669	15,363	27,221	37,770	31,932	8,148	20,940	52,111	47,356
2014	135,797	29,991	69,759	67,268	219,422	86,053	266,269	220,059	330,010
2015	29,938	10,756	24,063	26,778	62,912	23,983	63,850	65,605	76,557

Source: JAMB Annual Report 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015

<https://www.nigeriaschool.com.ng/jamb>

Table 4 above shows that from 2012 – 2015 the discipline such as Engineering/Environmental Technology, Medicine, Sciences, have higher admission each year. For instance, in 2015, the cumulative admission for sciences and Arts related courses are 2,013,123 and 157,336 respectively. In this circumstance, liberal and arts candidates are on disadvantage in access to university education.

Catchment Areas/Quota System

To worsen the problem is what the NUC called catchment areas and the quota system. Catchment areas are geographical areas from which a higher educational institution is allowed or obliged to pick candidates (Moti, 2008). It also means that preferences given to the indigenous places where university is located in considering candidates for admission. All states in the country are grouped into catchment areas of each federal university in order to give equal opportunities to all applicants. The quota system comprises important elements such as academic merit, which is determined by UME score and is allotted 45%. The second element is educationally disadvantaged states with 20% catchment areas with 25% and 10% to the discretion of the Vice Chancellor (NUC, 1999). The JAMB is therefore guided by these provisions in the admission each year. Some brilliant and even exceptional candidates with better scores are denied admission as a result of Federal Government Policy/Joint Admission and Matriculation Board. It is unbearable, painful and highly unjustifiable for a candidate for admission to suffer greater burden than other simply because of his place of birth.

The federal character policy has its root from section 14 of 1979 constitution and re-enacted in section 14 of 1999 constitution and states:

The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to promote national unity and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in the government or in any of its agencies (p.10).

Federal Government Policy on Deregulation of University Education

The emergence of private and state universities has a lot of implication for easy access to university education. For instance, these universities charge high school fees, which ordinarily candidates from most average poor families cannot afford to pay. Again, the federal government's policy of university deregulation and autonomy to federal and private universities has compounded this financial problem for these less privileged candidates as many of these universities are now forced to charge higher registration fees to meet their financial demands (Okwori & Okwori, 2007)

Conclusion

For Nigeria to join other nations of the world in pursuing sustainable development, human capital development should be first focus. Access to education enhances sustainable development in other spheres of life. This paper noted the increasing demand for access to university education in Nigeria and presented a worrisome statistical analysis of application and admission from 2011 – 2015. The author examined some issues of access to university education such as poor funding,

recklessness of university leadership, inadequate facilities/equipment, federal government admission policies, and absorption capacity among others. These factors are major determinant of quantity and quality of higher education in any country. Education is a gateway to the future and the driver of national development. This is why it is necessary to give equal opportunity and access to every Nigeria citizens to acquire skills and competences to empower them to contribute to the development of their country.

Recommendations

1. It is well documented that funds made available for universities is highly limited (Okebukole, 2008 and Oraili & Ebhdimen, 2011). Despite the recommendation of UNESCO that not less than 26% of national expenditure must be devoted to education. Let there be increase in funding so that necessary facilities in terms of classroom, instructional materials, staff equipment, library resources and other infrastructural facilities could be provided for sound university education.
2. In addition to the inadequate funding of universities, we still noticed 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 large number of students. The fund allocated to universities should be judiciously used and prioritized.
3. The issue of quota system is just like robbing Peter to pay Paul. This quota system negates the principles of equal opportunity to university education. It should be abolished to create room for merit.
4. The issue of high school fees charged by the state and private universities should be addressed. The NUC and federal government should intervene so that their school fees could be reduced to create chance for the poor and average Nigerians to have access to private university. Federal government should try to argue the funding of these private universities to reduce high charges.
5. The high demand of the university education calls for the federal government to establish more universities in the country and to fund them adequately. This will reduce pressure on private universities. This is necessary because the increase in private universities will not make any significant impact on the access to university education because average qualified Nigerians cannot afford their money.
6. Attitude of government toward education should also change. Successive government have demonstrated non-challent attitude toward education generally. Both the federal and some state government do not accord education the priority it deserves. University education is a big industry that deserves priority in the scheme of things. Akwumah (2005) points out that any government that places educational expenditure second or third in her budgetary list negates the fact that education is an investment that will reap dividends in all directions.

7. Lastly, open and distance learning programme in our universities should be encouraged. This will enable a large number of people to have access to university education.

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