

Politics of Education and National Development in Nigeria

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University Education in Nigeria: The Politics of Access and Balancing Supply

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Abstract

The paper examined the issues of access and imbalance in the Nigerian education system. Reasons for the imbalance and efforts that have been made by government to remedy the situation particularly at the university level were identified and discussed. The consequence of not balancing the supply of education in the different geo-political zones was also discussed. Apart from the fact that production of manpower will be inadequate, the available human capital will not be evenly distributed. It was therefore recommended among others that the catchment area policy should be tacitly implemented to ensure that all the geo-political zones in the country are evenly developed.

Key words: Access, University Education, Politics, Education Supply.

Introduction

Nigerians generally perceive education at all levels as a right, not a privilege. This means that nobody, big or small, male or female, indigene or non-indigene can be denied education. This notwithstanding, equalizing opportunity or access to education at every level is a difficult task for government. Etymologically, politics is derived from the Greek word polis or "city states". Amongst Greeks, politics embraces everything that touches the life of the State. Agbebaku (2000) defines politics as "who gets what, when and how". In essence, politics involves the allocation of scarce social, economic and cultural resources to individuals, groups, regions or classes. The above definition implies that in the third world, the attainment of political power determines what amount of the nation's commonwealth goes to a particular ethnic group, State or persons.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English (2001), access means a way of entering or reaching a place while equalization of opportunities means to make chances equal. Therefore, equality of opportunities to access university education means the removal of all forms of imbalances in the course of providing university education to every person that demands it. It is not just to universalize access but to ensure that no one is discriminated against. It is believed that equality of educational opportunity is an antidote to solving the problem of social inequality (Walson-Jack, 2000).

Emphasizing the importance of equalizing educational opportunities, Olubor (2004) posits that a citizen cannot contribute his best to the community in the absence of proper intellectual training, implying that more literacy is not enough, hence every citizen must possess the basic knowledge of the arts and science which makes him conscious of his own place in the civilization. This above assertion explains why in Russia, free and compulsory education is provided up to the high school level for every boy and girl and education up to the high school level is considered as the basic minimum for every citizen. Also in India according to Girlwood (1999) equal opportunities are being provided in the realms of education stating that much is been done to raise the status of those of depressed class origin by way liberal scholarships. Moreover, in the United States of America, according to Coleman, (1968) equalization of educational opportunities was made available to the blacks, women and people of low socio-economic status who were identified after the world war as victims of discrimination. Today, the educational attainment gap between all classes of

people in the US has become reasonably low with corresponding political will by the government to exterminate all traces of inequality among the American people. In Nigeria, attempts have also been made by government to give Nigerians demanding university education the opportunities to for placement. It is in this light that the paper attempt to discuss the evolution of educational imbalance in Nigeria, identify reasons for the politicization of access to education and the consequences of that misadventure on the Nigerian society.

Evolution of Educational Imbalance in Nigeria

Poignantly speaking, evolution of educational imbalance in Nigeria is worthy of note to better appreciate this work. Government's reason for bridging this educational gap stems from the fact that lack of uniformity in the provision and management of education in the different parts of Nigeria is as a result of religious, ethnic and socio-cultural differences. Western education, a product of Christian missionary groups to Nigeria was first received by Christian adherents in the south before others in the North. Even within the South, the Yoruba ethnic groups were the first to receive and benefit from western education, not only because the first school was located in their ethnic area, Badagry, but were privileged to have exposure to persons and institutions outside the shores of Nigeria (Jimoh, 2006).

These set of people and areas that received western education earlier than others became the dominant groups during the colonial and post colonial political arrangements. In present day Nigeria, these areas that received western education earlier have been christened educationally advantaged and those that received late, disadvantaged areas. The imbalance in the equation however is not only due to religion and ethnicity but also on other factors like geography, socio-economic background, culture, etc.

In view of this, there was need for a national policy which will not only harmonize but provide direction for the nation's educational development. The national policy on education endorses education as the necessary foundation for building:

- A free and democratic society.
- A just and egalitarian society.
- A strong and self-reliant nation.
- A great and dynamic economy.
- A land full of bright opportunities for all citizen.

So at the primary education level, government formulated Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy. This policy makes it mandatory for all Nigerians irrespective of religion, ethnicity, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sex, and age to receive primary education free of charge. In this regard everyone is guaranteed equal opportunity to receive the same type of primary education.

At the secondary education level, free and compulsory secondary education for the first three years has also been provided for the national policy on education. Private individuals and organization were recognized as partners with government in this regard. Adult education and literacy centers including special schools for the physically challenged have been provided for in the policy to give every Nigerian equal opportunity for both basic and secondary education. While at the tertiary level, the government established the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) to place suitably qualified candidates in all Universities, Polytechnics and Monotechnics in the country.

According to Achebe (2012), it is understood that admission into University College, Ibadan was solely on merit. The same was applicable to University of Nigeria, Nsukka and

the University of Lagos. However, political implications became obvious and **factual in the** admission of students in Nigeria's educational development hence various forms of **indices** for equal opportunities began to emerge. Amongst these were;

Quota System: In the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2004), section 171 (5) it was stated that "in exercising is power of appointment under this section, the present shall have regard to the Federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity". This was the section that led to the phenomenon of quota system. It preaches equal representation of citizens in national positions. For this reason, higher institutions of learning were empowered to admit to present the whole country or whole state.

The Catchments Area Criterion: Another percentage is approved for catchments area. The catchments area in most cases is the geographical or socio-cultural area contagious to the university or polytechnic or monotechnic in the area. The universities located in the geo-political zones are not evenly distributed as 16 are located in the south against 13 in the North. Table sheds light.

Table 1: Universities Supply Distribution in Nigeria

Geo-political Zone	Universities Located in the area	Number
South East	FUTO, NAU, UNN, ABAKILEKE	4
South West	OAU, LAGOS, FUTA, OYE, EKI, UNAAB (ABEOKUTA)	6
South South	BENIN, CALABAR, UYO, PORT-HARCOURT, EFFURUN, OTUOKE	6
North Central	LOKOJA, JOS, MINNA, ILORIN, YOLA	5
North East	MADUGURI, YOLA, ATBU, ABU	4
North West	UDU, BUK, ABU, DUTSINMA	4

Source: National Universities Commission (NUC, 2016).

According to the data in Table 1, a total of 16 universities are located in the south while only 13 are located in the North creating an imbalance. The imbalance is even visible within the geo-political zones in the country. This type of imbalance is not healthy in a country that is so diverse in culture, language, ethnicity and religion and, could be the bane of mistrust and violence amongst the people.

Special Consideration for Candidates from Educationally Less Developed States (ELDS) Criterion:

A proportion is also reserved for candidates from ELDS. The ELDS states are Adamwa, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Ebonyi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kawara, Nasarawa, Nigeri, Plateau, Rivers, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe and Zamfara. Additionally, states that established universities to complement federal government's effort in providing university education have all the local government area within the states as catchments areas.

Staff List: The staff of higher institution have the opportunity of pushing their candidates of choice into highly competitive courses through the staff list and vice chancellors list.

Philanthropists List: The private individuals who donate to the various departments so as to obtain the honorary doctorate degrees have their own list. They recommend their children, relations and kinsmen to highly competitive department.

Politicians List: Politicians in the legislative houses and executive positions lobby their preferred candidates into higher institutions. A lot of students in highly competitive courses would not have been there without this privilege.

Post UTME Examination: The management of higher institutions were granted the authority to screen successful UTME candidate so as to confirm their academic fitness before being admitted. However, this has been misplaced as an opportunity to indigenize admission into these schools.

Indigenous Vice Chancellors: The quest for indigenous vice chancellor or provost in certain schools have given school authorities the impunity to indigenize admission policies.

Arbitrary Postings: The JAMB has just introduced their posting of UTME candidates to schools they did not apply to for the post matriculation examinations also known as screening test. This was deliberately done to federalize opportunities irrespective of merit. The implication is that many students, who were posted to the institutions they do not like, stand the risk of losing their opportunities for admission for the year.

Reasons for Politicization of Access to Education

Misinterpretation of the Constitution: The federal character structure as suggested by the constitution is being misinterpreted by the educational institutions. It is not in all sectors of our economy that this policy of federal character is worth implementing. Take for instance the Shehu Shagari government of 1979-1982 introduced quota system in sports and games but that led to poor outings and sudden "death" of the Green Eagles. But with coming of celemens westerhoff, the German technical adviser, meritocracy or rule of merit was re-introduced and the senior national team changed to Super Eagles. Such after that, we won the Tunisia "94" nation cup and for the first time qualified for senior world cup. So while facilities for learning could be provided on basis of Federal character, the brains that will train on them should be chosen on merit.

Inadequate Compensation: Due to the failure of government to adequately compensate host communities over land used to build schools, they intend to suppress tension by giving admissions to candidates from these areas into highly competitive courses at the expense of those candidates that are better.

Limitation of Jewish Career Culture: In the quest to produce lawyers among lawyer's children or doctors from doctor's children, etc lecturers creates staff list. This was the case with Jewish career condition that what your father is, is what you will take up as career (a quintessential example is Jesus and his father, Joseph the carpenter).

Unhealthy Politics: In order to be denied the expected funding and dividends by the politicians, schools grant opportunities to candidates recommended by executives and legislators. This has led to provision for politicians list in admission policy of schools.

Consequences

1. The technocrats or elites that studied professional courses may not have been opportuned to attend schools if access had not been compromised to their advantage.

The gross domestic product (GDP) instead of rising sharply has been creeping. Even Nigeria government have in the recent past and present given the construction and some other contracts to foreign professionals leading to capital flight since professionals trained abroad have been accorded more recognition even by federal and state government establishment.

2. Emotional problem often grip students form families and areas that do not benefit from this politicking as they observe their colleagues with same or even lower performance admitted into schools.
3. Due to the heavy reliance on donors for funds, schools and end up being more loyal to their benefactors than to government. The worst of it all is that most of them are illiterates seeking for honorary doctorate degrees as a cheap means of covering up. This has lead to conflict of interest.
4. Politicization has led to general rot in the system. It has entrenched mediocrity or rule of poor standards which is generally has negatively affected the Nigerian economy.

Conclusion

The Nigerian people are very polaristic in terms of language, culture, religion and ethnicity. Politically, the country has delineated into 36 autonomous states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The states are further delineated into 770 independent government areas with over 170 millions people politically conscious to control resources in their area. It is therefore the uneven distribution of social services including educational opportunities in the country that has given rise to all forms of militancy or restiveness amongst the people. The emerging MASSOB militant groups in the East, OPC in the west, BOKO HARAM in the North and AVENGERS in the southern part of the country sheds light. In the circumstance therefore, the relevance of even distribution of social services particularly university education that is believed to enhance social economic status cannot be overemphasized. Implements to assessing education in the educationally disadvantaged areas should be identified and eliminated to encourage access at all levels of education.

Recommendations

1. Additional universities should be established in the northern region to create more opportunities for Nigerians in that region to attend universities.
2. The age discrimination policy and maximum number of universities an applicant can choose should be expunged from the general JAMB admission requirement. If this is done, access to university education in Nigeria will become better.
3. Government should increase funding to schools to discourage reliance on donor agencies. Departments and faculties should therefore be empowered to be financially self-reliant to be able to finance regular accreditation of academic programmes for quality assurance.
4. Applicants demanding placement in schools should be guided in their career choice in line with their abilities, interest and aptitudes to forestall the incidences of admission forfeiture owing to ill-qualification, a situation that is trending in many universities.

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