
Access To University Education In Nigeria: Challenges And The Way Forward

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Abstract

This paper examined the challenges militating against access to the higher institutions especially the Nigerian Universities. It adopted a descriptive survey design and the population of study consisted of second year students of the University of Port Harcourt hampering 2607 full time students. Stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting a total of 740 second year students as the sample for the study. The research instrument -was the 30-item Likert-scaled questionnaire titled "Challenges of Access to University Education Questionnaire" (CAUEQ). Four research questions and two null hypotheses were posed to guide the study. Data collected were analyzed using the mean for answering research questions and the Z-test for testing hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. Some of the findings of the study include that the National university commission's admission policy of quota system, funding and carrying capacity constitutes major challenges to access to the university education. Some of the recommendations proffered include amongst others, that the government should review the admission policies again and increase funding to the universities so that more facilities can be provided to increase carrying capacity and also create loans schemes for less privileged enabling deserving student be granted access to university education.

Key words: Access, University Education, Quota System.

Education plays a very important and critical role in the development of the citizens of any nation. No wonder the saying that no nation can rise above the quality of education of its citizens. Government has therefore devoted so much of its resources to

ensuring the provision of education for its citizens and has also ensured that its policies are patterned in such a way that it is made accessible to every citizen of the country. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 had as one of its components "a right to education" which according to Tomasevski (2003) implies amongst others that everyone has a right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages, elementary education shall be compulsory, technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. This means that government is obliged to make education available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable. There are four key indicators of the right to education;

- a) The government as the provider and founder of public schooling.
- b) The child as the bearer of the right to education.
- c) The child's parents (the first educators)
- d) The professional educators namely the teachers.

The national goals and philosophy as stated in the National Policy on Education, NPE (2004) states that every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or her ability. The objective of this policy is the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both within and outside the formal system. This philosophy tallies with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - which states that everyone has a right to education, the vital human rights requirement is that education should be a public responsibility funded by tax-payer fund and should not only be a free public service but a freely traded service. With university education been made accessible as a right or persons, enrolments suddenly shot upwards from 13 million in 1960 to 82 million in 1995. This eruption was announced by World Bank 1994 (Tomasevski, 2003). In Section 5 of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), it was clearly stated how government intends to widen access to higher education especially in the universities so that everyone that demands university education would have a fair chance of being selected. Government therefore following this policy has introduced some programmes and actions aimed at widening access to higher education.

In order to ensure quality university education, and to guarantee that the school's programmes and courses reflect national needs, the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) were put in place to ensure equal or equitable representation of all states in university education in areas of enrolment Tertiary education in the national policy on education

(2004) is described as education given after secondary education in universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics including those offering correspondence courses. The Federal Ministry of Education has responsibility for all federal higher institutions while the remaining are primarily controlled and funded by the state governments or private owners for the privately owned ones. It is however assumed that what is observed in the federal universities is similar to those that are found in state owned universities. Nigerian higher education institutions operate at a higher capacity than they were originally established for, yet the demand for access continues rise.

Access to University Education and its Challenges

Access, according to the National Policy on Education (2004), signifies making it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it Tonwe (2005), Dada (2004) defined access as the right to receive formal education as distinct from informal education, while UNESCO (2003) puts "access in tertiary education as meaning, "ensuring equitable access to tertiary education institutions based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance". Access means opportunity for formal education and access to universities is much talked about as less than 20% of those who apply to the universities are admitted (Ukertor 2010). According to Okebukola (2006), expansion and diversification in higher education, driven by the demand of an upwardly mobile population and the needs of a globalized economy, are important factors underlying the rising demand for university education in Nigeria, flusanya (2008) sees the issue of access as politics. He stated that variation in educational development between the southern and northern parts in Nigeria has resulted in the introduction of certain policies to engender even national representations in institutions nationally owned. Admission to universities became centralized through establishment of JAMB in 1978 by Military Decree No. 2 of 1978. Akpotu averred that the major obstacles to increased access to higher education in Nigeria are not prices but the reform policies of quota system, catchment area admission policy, poor and inadequate facilities and the limited absorptive capacities of Nigerian universities. JAMB was set up to evolve uniform standards for university admissions and to ensure that merit serves as the basis of selection of candidates for admission. Obilade (1992) observed that this was not the practice rather a quota based system of non-academic considerations predominates. The pattern of admission requires merit 45%, catchment area 25%, disadvantaged areas 20% and discretion 10%(Obiladel992).

Saint, Harlner & Strassner, (2003) found out from their research on the effects of these methods of admission on university education and found significant differences in academic performance between students admitted on merit and those admitted on other criteria. The drop out and repetition rates were three times greater than for the merit based group. The post-UME screening test, a political move by

government of not wanting to scrap JAMB due to the much criticism it has created, became another hurdle for intending applicants. The demand for education has become very high in recent times that in most developed nations like America, the demand for higher education is so high that the gross enrolment ratio is about 100% while that of Nigeria is five percent (5%) (Adegomre, 2007). What happens to the remaining ninety-five percent? The question then is; what are the limiting factors to get access into the Nigerian universities? The problem emanates from government policies and attitudes socio-economic background of students and discrimination in admission policy. There is consequently a huge difference between number of applicants and actual number admitted as shown in the Table below:

Table 1: UME Applications for 2001

Educational Developed States		Educationally less Developed states	
State	Highest	State	Lowest
Imo	78,495	Borno	3,076
Delta	66,221	Katsina	2,449
Anambra	56,159	Kebbi	2,149
Edo	50,368	Taraba	1,330
Ogun	50,368	Yobe	1,330
Ondo	37,346	Zamfara	52
Total	342,680	Total	11,717

Source: JAMB Application Statistics 2001.

Table 1 shows the level of disparity between the less developed states and the developed (educationally) ones. The policy of catchment area and educationally less developed favors these states.

Table 2: Total Admission and NUC Carrying Capacity for the Years 2000 - 2008

Academic Year	Total Admissions	NUC Carrying Capacity	Difference
2000/2001	45,766	74,929	-29,163
2001/2002	90,769	82,295	+8,474
2002/2003	51,845	70,625	-18,780
2003/2004	104,991	82,655	+2,336
2004/2005	122,492	82,655	+39,837
2005/2006	76,984	86,755	-10,229
2006/2007	88,524	86,755	+1,769
2007/2008	107,320	90,656	+16,764

Source: JAMB Admissions Statistics (2000-2007) & NUC Admission Bulletin in Ukertor, G. (2010).

Table 2 reveals differences between the number of admission spaces and the NUC allowed carrying capacity.

Table 3: Total Applications and Admissions 2000 - 2008

Year	Total Applications	Total Admissions	% Admitted	% Not Admitted
2000/2001	416,381	45,766	11.0	89.0
2001/2002	749,417	90,769	12.1	87.9
2002/2003	994,381	51,845	5.2	94.8
2003/2004	1,046,103	104,991	10.0	90.0
2004/2005	841,878	122,492	14.6	85.4
2005/2006	916,371	76,984	8.4	91.6
2006/2007	803,472	88,524	11.0	89.0
2007/2008	911,654	107,320	11.8	88.2

Sources: JAMB Admissions Statistics (2000-2007) & NUC Admission Bulletin in Ukertor, G. (2010).

From the table above, it is clear that there is a great difference between the percentage admitted and the ones not admitted.

Statement of the Problem

The demand for university education has been on the increase and many qualified candidates are not able to gain access to the higher institutions especially the universities. The general operations of JAMB indicates a political tool by government to equalize educational development between the north and south and by implication decelerating higher education development in advanced southern states. Access to higher education and the lack of capacity of the system towards the number of students seeking admission to higher education institutions continues to pose a serious problem. Attempts have been made to provide equitable access to the limited places by prescribing admission quotes to federal institutions. Providing access and equity to those seeking admission into the universities have not been easy due to challenges faced by the candidates, university administrators, policy makers. Therefore what challenges do the candidates face in seeking admission to universities in Nigeria? What challenges do the university administrators face concerning provision of access? What is the way forward from these problems? These are the main questions that this study will aim at answering.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to:

1. Identify the challenges or limiting factors to access into universities.
2. To find out what challenges the youth face in seeking admission to higher institutions
3. To identify the ways of ameliorating the challenges.

Research Questions

The following research questions were designed to elicit data for the research.

1. What are the challenges of access to university education in University of Port Harcourt?
2. What is the influence of gender in the responses of university students to the challenges of access to university education?
3. How does geo-political zone influence the responses of university students to the challenges of access to university education?
4. What are the possible solutions to the challenges of access to university education?

Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses was designed to find out the differences in responses of different category of students.

1. There is no significant difference between the responses of male and female students in the challenges of access to university education.
2. There is no significant difference between the responses of male and female students on the possible solutions to challenges of access to university education in Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

The demand for higher education has become very high in recent times and less than 20% of intending applications are admitted every year into the universities in Nigeria, the remaining 80% or more will have to wait for the next year's admission. The result of this study will be significant because it will enlighten educational planners and the government to review the issues of access and find out how far the access is being provided. This will help them to seek more ways to enhance access. Specifically the study will draw the attention of government to the workability of the policy of equality of educational opportunities and to review the admission policies specially that of the quota system, to find out if it is actually doing what it was meant to do; to balance educational opportunities, or if it sacrifices-merit on the altar of mediocrity. This will help to advice on whether to scrap it or modify it to the benefit of all. Also it will be

clearer to the government on the effect of inadequate funding so that they can increase budgetary allocation to expand facilities in the university.

Methodology

The study is of a descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of 2,607 second year students of the university as at 2012/2013 academic session of the University of Port Harcourt. Using stratified random sampling technique, a sample size of 740 students making up about 25% of the total population. The instrument for data collection was a 30-item modified Likert-scaled questionnaire tagged "Challenges of Access to University Education Questionnaire" (CAUEQ). It is made up of two sections; Section A gathers personal detailed information and Section B is on challenges of access to university. The instrument was scored using a modified 4-point Likert type scale of Strongly Agree (4 points), Agree (3 points), Disagree (2 points) and Strongly Disagree (1 point), while the reverse is true for negatively scored items. A criterion mean of 2.5 was used to guide decisions. The instrument was validated by experts in the Measurement and Evaluation department and tested for reliability at 0.05 level of significance. A reliability index of 0.85 using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was obtained. The questionnaire was administered on the participants by the researcher and collected on the spot. The mean, decision and rank order were used to answer, the research questions while the z-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level.

Results

Research Questions 1

What are the challenges of access to university education in University of Port Harcourt?

Table 1: Mean scores of the Responses to the Challenges of Access to University Education in University of Port Harcourt

S/N	Items	Mean \bar{x}	Decision
1.	Quota system of admission admits unqualified students	3.14	Positive
2.	Quota system of admission enthrones mediocrity	3.53	Positive
3.	Quota system threatens the admission of students from	2.99	Positive
4.	The school environment is not conducive for learning	3.44	Positive
5.	Quota system limits access to the university. —	3.26	Positive
6.	Parents prefer to train male children more than the females	2.63	Positive
7.	Lecture halls and facilities are not adequate in member and size	3.35	Positive
8.	Practical classes are limited due to inadequate laboratory and workshop equipment.	3.12	Positive

9.	Large class sizes hinders learning	2.87	Positive
10.	Learning facilities are adequate	1.66	Negative
11.	Lack of funds limits access and delays admission	3.35	Positive
12.	Parents find it difficult to pay their children's school fees due to lack of funds	3.18	Positive
13.	Funds are very necessary for university education	3.33	Positive
14.	Research programmes are not encouraged sufficiently in the university due to lack of funds	3.16	Positive
15.	Did not enter the university at the proper time due to lack of funds.	2.79	Positive
16.	The workload of the lecturers is much	2,86	Positive
17.	Through the quota system, more students are admitted	1.78	Negative
18.	Through the quota system, unqualified students are admitted.	2.85	Positive
19.	School programmes are usually disrupted by lecturer's strikes and cult activities.	3.21	Positive
20.	The school library is well stocked with books and encourages research programmes.	2.15	Negative
	Aggregate Mean	324	

Data in Table 1 shows the responses to the questionnaire items on the challenges of access to university education, the mean responses show mat all the items were accepted as challenges of access to university except items 10, 17 and 20 - with lowest mean responses of 1.66, 1.78 and 2.15 respectively. This implies a unanimous agreement by the students that the quota system stifles access and admission into the university, enthrones mediocrity indirectly, the school (university) environment is not conducive for learning with attendant poor state of facilities which are also inadequate an small. Also, their responses agree on issues of poor funding of universities by government which hinders research an other factors. Parents socio-economic factors, gender considerate, poor working conditions which leads to strike actions by lecturers, are identified challenges of access to university education.

Research Question 2

What is the influence of gender on the responses of university students to the challenges of access to university education?

Table 2: Influence of Gender in Response of Students to the of Access into the University of Port Harcourt

Gender	N	Mean(X)	Ranking

Females	304	49.21	1 st
Males	436	48.77	

From table 2 above, it could be observed that the students mean responses were more in favour of the females than of the males with mean responses of 3.41 and 3.32 respectively. This shows that the females' responses were more in agreement to items in the questionnaire on the challenges of access to university education in University of Port Harcourt than the males.

Research Question 3

How does geo-political zone influence the responses of university students to the challenges of access to admission into the University?

Table 3: Influence of Geo-Political Zone on the Responses of Students to the Challenges of Access to University education hi University of Port Harcourt

Geo-Political Zone	N	Mean(x)	Ranking
South-East	230	2.86	5th
North-West	10	3.51	2nd
North-Central	24	3.23	3rd
South-West	20	3.18	4th
South-South	454	3.63	1st
North-East	2	2.52	6th

Data in Table 3 shows the influence of geo-political zone on the responses of students to the questionnaire items on the challenges of access to university education. Students from the south-south has the highest mean response of 3.63 (ranked 1st) while those from north-east had the lowest mean of 2,52 (ranked 6th). The south-south students responses were highest probably because they were more in number and the university is located in their area.

Research Question 4

What are the possible steps that can be taken to address the challenges of access to university education?

Table 4: Mean Responses of Students to the Steps to Address Challenges of Access to University Education In University of Port Harcourt.

S/N	Items	Mean X	Decision
21.	Funding of universities should be increased	3.69	Positive

22.	Quota system of admission policy should be scrapped	3.27	Positive
23.	Creation of loan schemes to help the less-privileged students	3.35	Positive
24.	School fees should be made moderate and affordable	3.14	Positive
25.	University facilities should be expanded	3.35	Positive
26.	Access and admission should be based strictly on merit	3.44	Positive
27.	Quota system encourages access to universities	1.81	Negative
28.	Encourage equal opportunities of access for both male and female applicants	2.89	Positive
29.	Creation of distance learning programmes and, centres	3.23	Positive
30.	Creation of training programmes for staff and students on the use of ICT (information and communication technology)	2.76	Positive
	Aggregation mean	3.16	

Data in Table 4 shows the mean scores on responses to ways of addressing the challenges of access to university education, students agree to all the items with high mean scores of 3.69, 3.27, 3.35, 3.14, 3.35, 3.44, 2.89, 3.23, 2.76 and 3.16 respectively except for item 27 and the lowest mean score of 1.81. The aggregate mean scores of 3.16 shows that they accepted the items in the table as ways of addressing the challenges of access to university education, therefore access to university can be improved through increased funding, creation of loan schemes, scrapping the quota system policy and basing admission strictly on merit Also creation of distant learning programmes and centres, creation of training programmes for ICT usage among staff and students and expansion of facilities in the universities are ways of increasing access to university education in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference between the responses of male and female students on the challenges of access to university education.

Table 5: Z-test Analysis of Differences Between the Mean Score of Male and Female Responses on Challenges of Access to University Education In Nigeria.

Gender	Mean	SD	Df	Z-cal	Z-critical	N	Result
Female N= 304	49.21	7.334	738	-0.83	1.96	304	Not significant
Males N = 436	48.77	7.3				436	

Data in Table 5 shows the z-test analysis of gender differences in responses to the questionnaire items on the challenges of access to university education in Nigeria. The result shows that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female students on the challenges of access to university education. This is because

the calculated z-value of -0.83 is less than the critical value of 1.96 at 738 degree of freedom and 0.05 alpha significant level. Hence the null hypothesis is accepted which states that there is no significant difference between the responses of male and female students on the challenges of access to university education in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference between the responses of male and female students on the possible solutions to challenge of access into university education in Nigeria.

Table 6: Z-test Analysis of Difference Between The Mean Scores of Male and Female Students on the Possible Solutions to Challenges of Access to University Education in Nigeria

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	Z-cal	Z-critical	N	Result
Male	436	46.87	7.324	738	-0.86	1.960	304	Not significant
Females	304	48.52	7.312				436	

Data in Table 6 shows the z-test relationship between the mean scores of male and female students on the possible solutions to challenges of access to university education. The result shows that there is no significant difference between the mean responses of male and female students as the z-calculated value obtained (-0.86) is less than the z-critical value of 1,96 at 738 degree of freedom and 0.05 alpha significant level. Hence the null hypothesis is accepted which states that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female students on the possible solution to challenges of access to university education in Nigeria.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study include that a lot of factors constitute challenges to access to university education in Nigeria, Some of the challenges as identified by this study include the quota-based admission criteria, university catchment area, educationally less developed states criteria, others include inadequate facilities for conducive learning environment, inadequate funding, socio-economic status of parents and sponsors, poor working conditions of lecturers and the preference given to the education of the male child-over the female child. The study also revealed that steps such as increased funding, expansion of educational facilities, creation of distant learning programmes amongst others are steps that can be taken to address the challenge of access to university education.

There was no significant difference in the responses of male and female students both on challenges of access and possible strategies of addressing the challenges of access to university education in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that all the items in the questionnaire constitute challenges of access to university education in Nigeria. One of the challenges identified is the quota based admission criteria currently in operation. It was revealed from the high mean score that it was highly limiting access to universities. By this system, it means that a candidate in the southern states, considered to be educationally advantaged, who scores 300 out of 400, may not get admission into the university while his counterpart in the north who scores less will be admitted. This is in agreement with the findings of this study and as Akpan & Undie (2007:78) puts it, that using the quota system to guide and regulate access to university education has an inequitable effect. Much as it is good to encourage the educationally disadvantaged areas, it should not be at the detriment of others. It was also revealed in this study that the facilities in the universities are small, inadequate and in very poor shape. This cannot be a match to the increasing demand for university education coupled with the population growth in the institutions. The universities should be expanded according to demand. The NUC policy of carrying capacity will no doubt enhance quality (Oduwaye 2008), what then happens to thousands that cannot gain access because available facilities cannot take them.

Closely related to the issues or challenge of facilities expansion is the demand for funding. Funding and expansion go hand in hand. It was discovered in this study that funding is a major challenge to access to university education. Annual budgetary allocation to education has been on the decline, from 11.2% in 1999 to 5.9% in 2002 and 1.83% in 2003 (Akpan & Undie 2007:79). The minimum standard set for developing countries is 26% but rather than moving upwards, it is declining. Poor funding also denied many university courses from being accredited by NUC, thereby reducing the access of many who could have been admitted. The education Tax Fund (ETF) has been very helpful in infrastructural development. Government should increase budgetary allocation to education. 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 Ademiji 2009).

Ehiemetalor (2005) revealed in his study that 70.2% of Nigerians are poor and also said that 29.8% of families live on one dollar (N158.00) or above a day. Williams (2004) agreed by stating that out of the population of 150 million Nigerians about 120 million are poor. Many cannot afford to pay their children's school fees. This is in agreement with the findings of this study that due to lack of funds, school fees are hard to pay by parents and the result is that many are deprived access to university

education. Gender discrimination is another challenge that hinders access to university education in Nigeria. The result of this study shows differences in the mean responses of male and female students to challenges of access to university education in Nigeria. By tradition or religion depending on the part of Nigeria, preference is given to education of males over that of females, as female children are given out early in marriage. The traditional and religious beliefs affect adversely the female children's access to university education in Nigeria. This is in disagreement with the findings of Woke (2004) and Owane (2010) in their study that there is an increase in the enrollment of female students since the campaign on girl child education was initiated.

The findings of the study also provide a way forward from these challenges of access to university education in Nigeria. Some of the possible steps or strategies are that government should increase funding and expand facilities. Also more distance learning centres should be created and training programmes for ICT usage be emphasized for both staff and students of the university. Creation of flexible loan schemes and reduction of school fees are ways that can be used to ameliorate the plight of students and increase access for the economically less privileged ones in the society.

Conclusion

It is possible to achieve greater access to university education in Nigeria if available resources are conserved and directed towards expansion of existing facilities to accommodate the increasing number of students seeking admission into our universities. Also with the programme of open and distance learning, access can be made available learning, access can be made available to more deserving students as some government policies have made admission difficult for them.

Recommendations

- The federal government should review the issue of quota system or catchment area.
- Catchment should employ those who live in the area where the university is located be it an indigene of that place or not. Admissions should be liberalized.
- Open universities and distant learning (ODL) should be encouraged. Government should
- mount campaigns to alert on the advantages of OBL so they can seize the opportunity to have university education.
- Private universities can be encouraged but government should establish some regulatory policies to discourage excessive profit making and not be exploitative.
- Universities should be well funded by government so that there will be expansion. Old buildings should be renovated and new ones built to accommodate and give access to more candidates.

- Loan scheme should be introduced to the less privileged students by the government.
- More academic staff are required for effective course delivery across the disciplines to
- address the challenge of large staff students ratio so as to reduce the stress on the academic staff on ground.
- Academic staff should be retrained in the use of ICT/e-learning by the authorities concerned., the NUC.
- Revision of Education Trust Fund support for Books and Journals production. The financial assistance should be directed to establishing distance learning materials that would serve the greater populace seeking access to university education. The NUC should mandate all universities to establish distance learning programmes.

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