

## Issues on Access and Equalization of University Educational Opportunities in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** The study investigated access and equalization of university educational opportunities in Nigeria. In the process, survey research design was adopted for the study. Two research questions were drawn to guide the study. The sample comprised 600 Academic Heads of Departments and Programme Coordinators drawn from six federal universities in South-South, Nigeria. A questionnaire titled “Equalization of University Education Opportunity Questionnaire” was developed by the researchers for data collection. The internal consistency of the instrument using Cronbach alpha yielded a co-efficient of 0.84. The collected data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The result revealed that access and equalization of university education is hindered by carrying capacity, poor funding, and exorbitant charges and can be enhanced by increased funding, establishment of more universities, and introduction of scholarship schemes. Recommendations made, based on the findings included that facilities in the existing Universities should be expanded to accommodate more candidates seeking university education as well as, improve the funding of universities.

**Keywords:** University education, Access, Opportunities, Equalization, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Education remains a change agent and a very potent weapon against ignorance, superstition and poverty. Education in general and university education in particular, are fundamental to the construction of knowledge economy in all nations. As knowledge becomes important, so does university education. Access to education is the means by which new skills, attitude, knowledge, values and information can be acquired for social and economic development. Often, access to university educational opportunities can be a pointer to a country’s preparedness to achieve its manpower needs.

In a society that profess egalitarianism, equal educational opportunity should be a legitimate ‘right’ for all persons irrespective of status, whether big or small, male or female, indigene or non-indigene and no one should be denied education. The National Policy on Education [1] emphasizes the need for “provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system”. Equity of access to university education requires that admissions be open to those who have successfully completed secondary school, or its equivalent, or possessing entry qualifications, as far as possible, at any age and without any discrimination. However, the reality on ground is different as

equalizing opportunity or access to education at every level is a difficult task all over the world, particularly in Nigeria due to limited resources. Equality of educational opportunity means the removal of all forms of imbalances and discrimination in the course of providing education to every person in the society. It is not just the aspect of universalizing access to education but also include the aspect of ensuring that no one is discriminated against in terms of funding, curriculum coverage, school location, gender and teachers’ distribution [2]. It is strongly believed that equality of educational opportunity is a prerequisite for tackling the problem of social inequality. D’ Azevedo [3] argued that although equal access ensures that all children, no matter their socio-economic group, have access to the school system, equal access in itself does not ensure either equality or equity.

Despite bold efforts by governments and even private citizens to respond to the problem of access to university education through the establishment of new universities, the problem of limited access has persisted. The traditional way of delivering university education has nevertheless been unable to keep pace with the volume of candidates seeking entry to the universities yearly. There is a tremendous pressure on universities for admission. Thus, access to university education is denied to many qualified candidates who might have potential for contributing positively to the development

of the nation. For instance, in 2011/2012 session Nigeria had 117 universities with 500,000 carrying capacity, amounting to 33.25 % and 1,503,933 students applied that year. In 2012/2013 with 128 universities and available admission space for 520,000 (29.96%), a total of 1,735,729 applied, 300,000 were admitted leaving a balance of over 1,328,986. In 2014/2015, the universities increased to 142 and 1.7million applied but only 1.2 million were admitted [4]. This analysis confirms the problem of demand for access to university education in Nigeria.

Okojie [5] affirmed that there is a rapid increase in the demand for university education since it is a vehicle for socio-economic transformation and that the policy of government is to provide sufficient access to university education for those who desire it. The author further emphasized that the difficulty has been that of insufficient resources to support contemporary population explosion in university education. The critical challenge for managers of universities and the university system is how to widen access to university education for the greatest number of candidates without overstretching the resources and lowering the quality. More needs to be done through expansion of resources for existing programmes, as well as, establishment of new programmes and universities to increase the absorptive capacity of the university system to cater for more candidates. Essentially, every individual who is qualified for university education should be given opportunity to do so. Okebukola [6] maintained that the expansion and diversification of university education is driven by the demand of an upwardly mobile population and the needs of a globalized economy that are important factors underlying the rising demand for university education in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the existing university capacity in Nigeria can only provide admission for about fifteen percent of eligible candidates [7].

Barriers to equalization of university education opportunity refer to circumstances or obstacles that restrict people from unhindered opportunities to access equal educational opportunity. According to Aluede, Idogho and Inonike [8] such barriers include; failing to enroll in an educational institution; lack of opportunity to attend school regularly; and inability to transit to the next level of education. Nwogu [9] extend the list to include; individual differences among pupils, selection method, quota system of admission, unaffordable costs, gender discrimination, armed conflicts, limited spaces, and so on. Akpotu [10] stated that barriers to increased access to higher education in Nigeria is not just the prices “but the nefarious policies of quota system, catchment admission policy, inadequate facilities and the limited absorptive capacities of Nigerian universities”.

To increase equalization of university education, Nwogu, Moses-Promise and Moses [11]

suggests the opening of more federal and state universities, approval of special universities, granting more licenses to private individual and voluntary agencies, launching of scholarship schemes, introduction of quota system for disadvantage states and admission for catchment areas. In the same vein, Khan [12] is of the view that equalization of educational opportunities can be achieved through expansion of educational facilities, wide distribution of educational institutions, provision of scholarships and provision of incentive measures that are properly implemented and administrative structure that is properly streamlined with strong will and determination. This study aims at examining issues on access and equalization of university educational opportunities.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

There has been a growing demand for university education in Nigeria in the past decades. This is occasioned by the realization of the importance and social benefit of this level of education. However, entering a university has not been an easy task for most Nigerian youths especially those from the South- South region. Every year, many secondary school leavers apply for admission into universities but at the end, only a small percentage is given admission. Over the years, a number of policies have been put forward to ensure equity in the admission process. One such was the massive expansion of universities through setting up of more federal and state universities, as well as, the granting of licenses to private individuals to establish universities. This led to the establishment of more universities in Nigeria. As at the last count in January 2018, there were 158 universities in Nigeria. In spite of the tremendous expansion and development of university education in recent years, the equality of educational opportunities is still being criticized. Thus, indicating that expansion and development in university education does not translate to equalization of educational opportunities. Arising from this therefore, the study is carried out to examine access and equalization of university educational opportunities in South- South, Nigeria.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to:

- Investigate the barriers to equalization of university educational opportunities in Nigeria.
- Suggest strategies for enhancing equalization of educational opportunities.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Two research questions guided the study.

- What are the barriers to equalization of educational opportunities?
- What are the strategies for enhancing educational opportunities?

### **METHODOLOGY**

Survey design was adopted for the study. The area of study is the South-South region of Nigeria. The population comprised academic Heads of Departments (HODs) and Programme Coordinators because they understood the criteria used in admission processes. Purposive sampling technique was utilized to draw a total of 600 Heads of Department and Programme Coordinators from six universities as the sample. A 19-item instrument designed by the researchers tagged "Equalization of University Education Opportunity Questionnaire" was used for data collection. The instrument had a 4-point response option of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The instrument was validated by two experts in the Department of Educational

Administration in University of Calabar. The internal consistency of the instrument using Cronbach Alpha was 0.84. This was considered high enough to confirm the reliability of the instrument. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The research questions were analyzed using a mean benchmark of 2.50. The respondents were deemed to have accepted or agreed when the mean response was at least 2.50. A mark less than 2.50 signified disapproval

**RESULTS**

**Research question 1**

What are the barriers to equalization of educational opportunities?

**Table-1: Mean score and standard deviation of respondents on the barriers to equalization of university education opportunity**

S/N	Questionnaire items	N	Responses				Total		Decision
			SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	
1.	Inadequate academic preparation by students	600	89	106	108	297	2.19	1.09	Disagree
2.	Fewer vacancies due to carrying capacity	600	218	198	100	84	3.33	1.53	Agree
3.	Poor funding of universities	600	332	97	69	102	3.31	1.52	Agree
4.	Differences in socio-economic status	600	188	253	80	79	2.78	1.33	Agree
5.	High cost of university education	600	233	138	94	135	2.59	1.26	Agree
6.	Increase number of persons seeking admission into universities	600	48	200	96	256	2.24	1.11	Disagree
7.	Exorbitant charges by private/state universities	600	185	233	150	32	2.98	1.41	Agree
8.	Policies of quota system	600	259	187	39	115	2.66	1.29	Agree
9.	Gender discrimination	600	398	101	79	22	2.78	1.33	Agree
10.	Indigene and non-indigene dichotomy	600	131	90	200	179	2.48	1.32	Disagree
11.	Government policy of 60:40 ratio bias of science against humanity	600	143	166	176	115	2.80	1.34	Agree
12.	Poor performance in post UTME test	600	218	148	118	116	2.59	1.26	Agree
	Total						32.73 (2.73)	15.79 (1.31)	

Mean score ( $\bar{x}$ ) = 32.73 ÷ 12 = 2.73, SD = 15.79 ÷ 12 = 1.32

Table 1 shows data on barriers to equalization of university education opportunities. From the data presented, it can be observed that all the items were highly rated by the respondents except items 1, 6 and 10 which had a mean score below the criterion mean.

However, with the aggregate mean of 2.73, it indicated that respondents were of the opinion that equalization of university education in Nigeria was hindered by low carrying capacity, poor funding, and exorbitant charges.

**Table-2: Mean score and standard deviation of respondents on the strategies for enhancing equalization of university education opportunity**

S/N	Questionnaire items	N	Responses				Total		Decision
			SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	
1.	Admitting students based on merit	600	197	256	129	18	2.58	1.28	Agree
2.	Licensing of more private universities	600	208	194	117	81	2.61	1.27	Agree
3.	Establishment of more federal/state universities	600	158	237	70	135	3.11	1.45	Agree
4.	Increased funding of existing universities	600	330	155	72	43	3.32	1.52	Agree
5.	Establishment of open distance university	600	189	203	126	82	2.56	1.25	Agree
6.	Scholarship scheme for students of poor socio-economic background	600	147	277	100	176	2.75	1.32	Agree
7.	Increased private participation to improve equity	600	248	162	68	122	2.81	1.34	Agree
	Total						19.74 (2.82)	9.43 (1.35)	

Mean score ( $\bar{x}$ ) = 19.74 ÷ 12 = 2.82, SD = 9.43 ÷ 7 = 1.35

### Research question 2

What are the strategies for enhancing educational opportunities?

Table 2 shows presentation of data on strategies for equalization of university education opportunities. From the data presented, it can be observed that all the items were highly rated by the respondents. With the aggregate mean of 2.82, it indicated that respondents were of the opinion that equalization of university education in Nigeria can be enhanced by increased funding, establishment of more universities, increased participation of the private sector and introduction of scholarship schemes, and so on.

### DISCUSSION

The findings on research question one revealed that high cost of university education, exorbitant charges by private/state universities, government policy on ratio, gender discrimination, fewer admission spaces, socio-economic status, and poor funding significantly constitute barriers to equalization of university educational opportunities. The finding agrees with the result of the studies by Nwogu [9] and Akpotu [10] who observed that barriers to increased access and equalization of education revolve round individual differences among pupils, selection methods, quota system of admission, unaffordable costs, gender discrimination, armed conflicts, limited spaces, catchment area admission policy, inadequate facilities and the limited absorptive capacities of Nigerian universities.

The result of research question two as indicated in Table 2 revealed that equalization of university education can be enhanced by increased funding, establishment of more universities, increased participation of the private sector and introduction of scholarship schemes. This finding agrees with those of Nwogu, Moses-Promise and Moses [11] and Khan (n.d.), who noted that equalization of university education opportunity can be achieved through the opening of more federal and state universities, scholarships, granting of more licenses to private individuals and voluntary agencies, launching of scholarship schemes, introduction of quota system for disadvantage states and special admission for catchment areas, as well as, provision of incentive measures that are properly implemented and backed by strong political will and determination to expand access to university education.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined equalization of university educational opportunities in Nigeria. It is evident from the study that there are severe challenges to equalization of educational opportunities in Nigeria. This has far reaching implications for the university system managers. The current inequality in the distribution and

access to university education should be viewed as a national issue, requiring urgent attention. It is therefore recommended that:

- Facilities in the existing universities in Nigeria should be expanded to accommodate more candidates seeking university education.
- There should be substantial increase in staff strength since poor staff/student ratios deplete individual attention to students and thereby pose a threat to quality of learning in the universities.
- The government should as a matter of urgency improve on the funding of universities, as well as, formulate policies that would give every qualified Nigerian access to university education.

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