

# Access, Equity and Quality University Education for the Disadvantaged Groups in Nigeria: Myths and Agenda for Action

ROBERT-OKAH, I. (Ph.D)

Department of Educational Foundations & Management, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni,  
Port Harcourt  
e-mail: [ibe.okoh@yahoo.com](mailto:ibe.okoh@yahoo.com).

MRS. COMFORT OSIOBE (Ph.D)

Department of Educational Foundations & Management, Delta State College of Education Warri

## Abstract

Inpite of the crying need to build a more egalitarian society and a more regionally integrated national economy, only but a few Nigerians are seriously concerned about the issues of access and equity in university education. The loud silence is to a large extent the result of the growing acceptance of certain myths and misconceptions about the essence and role of university education in national development and social change. Hitherto, there was a policy position that countries such as Nigeria should de-emphasizes university education in favour of basic education. But recent developments strongly indicate a strong relationship between investment in university education and improvement in economic and human development indicators. As a result, this paper emphasizes that university education should be treated as public good than a private good, and that efforts should equally be made to ensure that access to it and its benefits are equitably available to all segments of the country. The paper recommends among others, the broadening of university education policies with regards to affirmative action and quota admissions, keying into the Air virtual University Project in Nairobi, Kenya, licensing of more private universities and invigorating the Open University model to improve access and equity in university education in Nigeria.

**Key words:** Access, Equity, Quality, University Education, Myths, Agenda.

## Introduction

Over the years, there have been complaints about the relevance of graduates by Nigerian universities by employers of labour and government officials. The universities had invariably responded by for example, introducing Post-UME tests to supposedly prevent candidates of low quality from gaining entrance, and by more seriously displaying ICTs for teaching and learning and establishing more linkages with universities in other parts of the world for purposes of staff development and enhanced students exposure. But little or no attention is directed to the area of access, and equity despite much slogans on egalitarianism and regionally-integrated economy. The loud silence on equity issues may to a large extent be the result of the growing acceptance of certain myths about the essence and role of university education in national development and social change. Based on this fact, this paper discussed the myths and agenda for action on access, equity and quality of university education for the disadvantaged groups in Nigeria. This discussion was guided by the following sub-headings;

- i) Concept of access, equity and quality university education.
- ii) Importance and essence of university education.
- iii) Social inequality and university education relationship.
- iv) Some popular myths about university education in Nigeria.
- v) Major marginalized groups in Nigeria and remedies offered
- vi) Agenda for action, conclusion and recommendations.

## Concept of Access, Equity and Quality University Education

Access to university education according to Education Sector Analysis (ESA, 2003) implies making “it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it”. Access to university education therefore, implies making it possible for everyone that desires university education to receive it. It means that obstacles that prevent anyone from taking advantage of the opportunities should be removed. For this to the possible, it means that enough classrooms, laboratories and instructional facilities should be provided for everyone. A rather encompassing definition by UNESCO (2003) put “access in tertiary education” as meaning “ensuring equitable access to tertiary education institutions based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance”. This definition considers very central post-secondary opportunities for under-represented groups such as indigenious peoples, cultural, ethnic and linguistic minorities, immigrants, refugees, the disabled and women. It also considered issues in life-long

education learning that can take place at anytime with due recognition of previously acquired skills through opportunities for adults retraining for the workforce. Additionally, school dropouts and second-chance learners are also central.

Equity on the other hand implies that “all segments of the society get their fair share of access to whatever educational opportunities are provided” (ESA, 2003). Quality according to the New Webster’s Dictionary of English Language, Int. ed (2000) is “grade or degree of excellence”. From these definitions, quality may imply standard of a thing when compared to other things like it. Tahir (Lechner, 2006) considered quality to mean “three interconnected factors viz; efficiency (e.g better use of available resources); relevance (e.g to need and contexts); and something more (e.g journey a little further than mere efficiency and relevance”. Quality of the university education system according to Nwankwoala (2007) means the extent to which the university education system achieves its set objectives and goals. The implication being that products of the system should be able to solve environmental and societal needs of the nation. Okebukola and Mustapha (2005) observed that quality simply means fitness for purposes. Therefore, if quality of a system does not fulfill the purpose for which it was designed, it is then of low quality since according to Robert-Okah and Odelola (2008), quality has to do with whether something is good or bad, it measures the standard of something when compared with other things. When applied to university institution, Okebukola and Mustapha (2005) perceived quality as the success which the university provides educational environment where students achieve worthwhile learning goals, including right academic standard.

### **Importance and essence of university education**

The Communique of Gender Budgeting Initiative (2003) highlights the importance of access to education as both a basic need (one which is necessary to the fulfillment of an individual’s personhood) and also a strategic need (that which will yield access to other opportunities such as health, employment and political awareness). It also regards access or quality education by all regardless of class or sex as a critical element of development ... as education helps to nurture democracy and promote peace. As a result, it has become obvious that acquisition of education, most especially university education, is essentially important and useful to man. This is because education in general and university education in particular, are fundamental to the construction of a knowledge economy and society in all nations (Saint, Hartnett and Strassner, 2004). It was equally noted that for the potential of university system in developing economies such as Nigeria and the sub-saharan Africa to be fulfilled, problems of finance, efficiency, equity, quality and governance should be addressed. These challenges are linked to the growing role of knowledge in economic development, rapid changes in telecommunication, technology and the globalization of trade and labour markets. And since knowledge has become the most important factor for economic development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has through its capacity, been able to augment productivity, and increasingly constitutes the foundation for a country’s competitive advantage.

Contrary to the policy position that was popular at the height of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the eighties and early 1990s that countries such as Nigeria should de-emphasize university education in favour of basic education, an unambiguous empirical evidence according to Ahonsi (2008) indicates that countries which comparatively invest more in university education over years record more impressive rates of improvement in their economic and human development indicators. To be more specific, it is now abundantly clear that rich nations are largely rich because of the skill of their citizens and quality of the institution that underpin their economies and societies. And even for natural resource-rich developing countries such as Brazil, Malaysia and Botswana, a major factor in their better economic and human development performance than equally natural resource-rich Nigeria in the past three decades is better quality of human capital and management capacity, which is a direct effect of broadness of access to and access to and quality of university education. It is for these reasons that Nigeria with poor human development indicators, dysfunctional democratic system and long-running economic under-performance, university education should be viewed and treated more as a public good than as a private good. It serves much more than job skills training and economic growth purposes and therefore demands strong policy intervention to ensure that access to it and its benefits are equitably distributed to all segments of the citizenry.

As with other levels of education, the real objective of university education is all-round qualitative transformational development of the individual to overall societal development (FRN, 2004). As a key resource for ensuring a country’s present and future wellbeing, it cannot just be about mere acquisition of technocratic skills required for available jobs in the national economy. Indeed, good quality university education furnishes its beneficiaries, irrespective of their disciplinary specialization, with core competencies and cognitive capacities that enable them for life to be good at learning how to learn and be critical producers and users of knowledge without which they cannot be truly useful to any employer of labour in whatever sector of the economy. No

wonder the Federal Government of Nigeria under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo instituted more policy and institutional reforms on issues of access, equity and quality in university education when compared with the military regimes before it. Quoting Federal Republic of Nigeria 2001: 6, Saint et al (2004) indicated that Among the government's notable reforms are institutional audits of all universities and associated parastatal bodies, revocation of the Vice Chancellor's privilege of personally selecting 10 percent of each year's student intake, reconstitution of all University Governing Council with broader representation. The licencing of more private universities, exemption of university staff from public service salary scales and regulations, and a 180 percent increase in funding of the universities that raised per students allocations from the equivalent of USD 360 to USD 970 per year

Government equally granted autonomy to universities which gave them the full responsibility for institutional governance, restored block grant funding to universities, circumscribed the power of the National University Commission, vested University Senates with the authority to decide on curricula, returned to universities the right to set admission criteria and select students and laid the foundation for minimum academic standards (Oyebade, Oladipo and Adetoro, 2005). Also, a set of legislative proposals designed to reform existing university education laws was approved and forwarded to the National Assembly for deliberation. The proposal according to Saint et al (2004) included to;

- ❖ give university councils the responsibility to set institutionised policies,
- ❖ hire top management and forward institutional budget,
- ❖ give universities control over their own students admissions,
- ❖ limit the role of NUC to quality assurance and system co-ordination,
- ❖ place limit on the right of employees to strike,
- ❖ legally de-link universities from public service, thereby ending their adherence to government regulations with regard to employment, remuneration and benefits. This policy statement is a reflection of access and equity principles which the Nigerian government was trying to improve upon.

### **Social Inequality and University Education Relationship:**

The relationship between social inequality and university education is inevitably a complex, multi-dimensional and bi-directional one, given that the latter could be a breaker or reproducer of the former, depending on the time and place in question. But for the purpose of this discussion, the guiding premises (for which there are some empirical bases) are that: intelligence and educational attainment are not natural outcomes but rather something conferred by advantages acquired at home and at the lower levels of the schooling system; university education access and success are randomly distributed even among those with similar pre-tertiary educational qualifications; and differentials in university education access and performance are directly correlated with subsequent social, occupational and income status (Ahonsi, 2008). Meaning that despite the growing problem of graduate unemployment, the so-called mismatch between university graduate output and labour market requirements, and the influence of other vital variables in access to post-graduation economic and social opportunities, access to and successful participation in university education in Nigeria remain a function of socio-economic status as they are future predictors of socio-economic status and social mobility. But once the barriers to access to university education are broken, acquiring it tends to enhance social mobility and this could be a potent force to reduce class, gender, ethno-regional and other forms of inequities and national integration. Greater democratization of access to university education and effective participation should therefore be made a subject for serious public policy intervention.

### **Some Popular Myths about University Education in Nigeria:**

Some common misconceptions about inequity in access and effective participation and successful completion of university education in Nigeria are;

- 1) **There are too many Universities in Nigeria:** There has been a significant increase in the number and diversities of universities in Nigeria since 1960. From only six in 1975, 28 by the mid-1980s and 40 by the mid-1990s, there are now 117 universities in Nigeria (Ewa, 2012). Much of the increase of the 1980s and early 1990s was driven by the state governments-established universities, as new state governments tried to respond to citizens of their states, while most of the increase since 2000 are private-sector led. Never-the-less, for a country of 162 million (about a fifth of whom are university-going age) and that aspires to be one of the top-20 national economies in the world by 2020, 117 universities are inadequate compared to over 130 in Brazil with a population of 192 million and 23 in South Africa with a population of 48 million (Omuta, 2010). What should however be considered is the absorptive capacity and quality of the existing universities, not their number.

According to Durosaro, Adedeji and Osasona (2005) both the government (Nigeria) and its citizens regard the current enrolment for university education as grossly inadequate (i.e 4 percent) when compared with other oil-producing countries such as Indonesia and Brazil with enrolment ratio of between 12-14 percent.

According to Omuta (2010), all universities in Nigeria as at 2007 had less than 900,000 students, the total enrolment of a multi-college university in California, USA, with its cluster campuses. Except for 1998, Nigerian universities have never managed, since 1980 to date, to admit up to 20 percent each year students applying for admissions and they tend to be characterized by high matriculation-related wastage rates among those that managed to be offered admission (Ewa, 2012).

**Table 1:** Statistical analysis of Universities to selected countries of the world.

S/No	Country	Population (Million)*	** No of Universities	University per 100,000	University Ratios country/Nigeria +
1	USA	312.8	3262	104	30.5
2	Brazil	192.4	1441	57	13.5
3	Colombia	46.3	281	61	2.6
4	Nigeria	162.4	117	7	1.6
5	Ghana	24.2	30	12	0.3
6	India	1210.0	1540	13	14.4
7	Japan	127.7	716	56	6.7
8	China	1330.0	1194	9	112
9	Malaysia	28.3	75	27	0.7
10	U.K	62.3	236	38	2.2
11	France	65.0	570	88	5.3
12	Germany	81.8	405	50	3.8
13	Switzerland	7.9	107	135	1.0
14	Australia	22.8	103	45	1.0

Source: Adapted from Ewa I.O.B (2012:4). Universities and private sector: Promoting research and entrepreneurial network for economic transformation.

\* UN projections for 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2012

\*\* Webometric Ranking of Universities

+ The ratio of the number of universities of a country (Same row) with the number in Nigeria.

**Table 2:** Application for admissions into university placement (2001-2009)

S/N	Academic Year	Applications for University Placement	Admissions into Universities	Admission as % of Application
1	2001	893,359	106,304	11.90
2	2002	1,025,988	129,525	12.60
3	2003	1,172,313	175,358	14.90
4	2004	1,043,361	108,148	10.40
5	2005	926,133	125,673	13.10
6	2006	1,030,670	107,161	10.40
7	2007	893,259	149,033	16.70
8	2008	1,028,259	183,420	17.80
9	2009	1,183,574	211,991	13.87
				<b>13.87</b>

Source: Adapted from Omuta (2010: 16). The place of private participation in higher education: A periscope on private universities in Nigeria

This has resulted into a very sharp education pyramid with about 30 million in primary schools, less than 10 million in secondary schools and less than a million in all tertiary institutions (Ewa, 2012).

**2) Nigeria is over-producing University Graduates:** The university-going age (18-35 years) population of Nigeria is at least 30 million and all of the universities produce only about 70 – 75,000 graduates every year (Ahonsi, 2008). This is a very small number in a high-performing medium-sized national economy. South Africa in comparison with her 23 universities produces as many as that number each year. So, is it a question of over-production of graduates or shrinking job creation of the national economy?

**3) There is a Missing link between Graduates Produced and labour market requirements:** It is true that Nigerian universities presently produce more students in the humanities, social science and business-related courses than science, technology and medical courses for which greater needs exists in the economy, but given that university graduates have much lower unemployment rates than secondary and non-university graduates and some surveys show that graduate unemployment in Nigeria may not be as high as is projected in the mass media, the true level being between 10–20 percent, the real issue may have to do with the quality hence, the employability of the graduates being produced than the number.

### **Major Marginalized groups and Remedies offered**

#### **a) Income Status**

Given that the national minimum wage is not even up to N20,000 per month, and Nigeria's national income still hovers around \$400 with over 50 percent of Nigerians living on less than \$1 a day, most Nigerians of university-going age and their parents and guardians are poor. But a study by Ahonsi (2008) suggested that the non-fee cost borne by an average student in state and federal government-owned universities is about N35,000 =. Today, the figure may have probably increased to between N70–80,000 = per semester or about N25,000 per month. The private university on the other hand, according to Obekunle (2011) charge on the average between N300,000 = and 700,000 = per student, per semester as fees. Little wonder the profile of the university student population is different from that of the country's university-going age. In the 1960's and 1970's according to Ahonsi (2008), about 70 percent of university-trained workers had parents who were unschooled farmers or petty traders raised in rural areas and had no sibling that was a university graduate. But by the late 1990's more than 80 percent of Nigerian undergraduates were by the socio-economic status of their parents/guardian, from the middle and upper class, with more than 60 percent having one or more-siblings that have graduated from university. Meaning that universities in Nigeria have in the last three decades become more exclusive of poor students. But there is very little empirical evidence to indicate whether poor students who break into Nigerian universities display higher drop-out and repetition rates and poor overall academic performance than their more privileged counterparts. To date, response to economically-driven barriers to university education access according to Ahonsi (2008) has been by way of scholarships, bursaries, loans and work-study programmes. Most of the large government-funded and managed scholarship schemes have, however not been properly-targeted at poor students and tend to be rather generalized while the private sector-managed ones tend to privilege academic performance over financial constraints as the key criterion for selecting beneficiaries. The work-study programmes that exist presently in a few universities are simply too small in scale to impact on this problem.

#### **b) Physical Disability**

The Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities according to Ahonsi (2008) estimated, that there are 19 million Nigerians that are living with different types of physical challenges and yet it is estimated that young people with physical challenges experience a near-zero access to university education. There appears not to be yet any available empirical evidence of the differentials in academic performance between students with and without physical disabilities. And no provision appears to have been put in place by any special public sector-led or large private sector-sponsored initiative to facilitate university education access and success for this significant population sub-group.

#### **c) Rural Residence**

Based on few surveys conducted over the last four decades, the typical university undergraduate was raised and had his/her secondary education in urban areas in contrast to the situation in the 1960s when most were children of farmers and petty traders and had rural secondary school background. Today, about 60 percent of Nigeria's population is located in the rural areas which are known to have lower quality (public funded) secondary schools and are only able to produce few students who can pass the university entrance examination and obtain the required number of credits in the relevant subjects to qualify for matriculation. Meanwhile, no known study appears to have examined rural-urban differentials in access to university scholarships, bursaries, and loan schemes managed by federal, state and local government, NGOs and organized business. It is however suspected that these schemes have urban bias.

#### **d) Gender**

Relatively, more evidence exist on women's access to and successful participation in university education. The enrolment figures according to Ahonsi (2008) indicate a more than tripling of women's university access from less than 10 percent in 1962 to about 35 percent today. But women have continued to be more seriously under-represented, in the science and technology-related courses in Nigerian universities (Obekunle, 2011). Available evidence did not indicate any significant difference in academic performance or drop-out rates between male and female undergraduates even if this may vary by region and rural-urban residence. In terms of responses, a few

scholarship schemes emphasize gender as an award criterion but generally for female undergraduates, the university environment in Nigeria is less than conducive for their academic progress given the continuing problem of sexual harassment, under-representation of women among the teaching staff and gender-biased curriculum amongst others.

#### **e) Regional Disparities**

Despite the long running-establishment of quota and catchment areas, measures to bridge the university education gap between northern regions and the southern ones, the gap between the educationally disadvantaged northern states of Jigawa, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Taraba and Yobe - and the educationally advantaged southern states of Anambra, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ogun, Ondo –remains quite large at nearly 40 percent by 2000/2001 (Ahonsi, 2008). This gap between the so-called advantaged states and the average states in the placement of candidates in universities though appeared to have narrowed in the last 15 years. It is expected that the rapid proliferation of private universities since 2000 have impacted adversely on these trends given the concurrence of educational and income differentials between and within regions. It should also be noted that there may be a significant difference in the matriculation wastage rate and quality of academic performance between students admitted on merit and those admitted through catchment-area policy and quotas.

#### **Agenda for Action**

A number of interrelated policy and programmematic actions have been put forward to increase university access and graduation rates for under represented and excluded students. They include:

- 1) The broadening of higher education policies with regards to affirmative action and quota in admissions beyond state/region and discipline to include rural-urban residential background, parental socio-economic status, gender and physical disabilities.
- 2) There should be a planned and phased expansion of the university sector through enhancement of the absorptive capacity of existing universities, establishment of more universities on a public-private partnership model, and the boosting of open and distance provisioning, taking advantage of advances in the application of ICTs for e-learning by all universities (that is, beyond the National Open Universities of Nigeria).
- 3) The replacement of “across-the-board” scholarships, grants and bursaries with target group-oriented schemes that focus assistance on qualified but financially, spatially and physically challenged students.
- 4) The building of a broad-based coalition or constituency of university students, academics, parents associations, employers of labour, political leaders, civic leaders, mass media and university administrators to promote informed debate and advocate for greater inclusiveness in university education.
- 5) The engagement of the NUC, university councils, senates and vice-chancellors to develop mechanisms that provide academic and social supports to the underrepresented and disadvantaged students including special tutoring schemes, peer mentoring and work-study programmes that promote their academic achievements.
- 6) Institution of group-specific remedial programmes in the short-run and improvement of materials and teaching resources in public secondary schools, which tend to be mostly populated by poorer and socially disadvantaged students.
- 7) The funding of multi-disciplinary research on factors, processes and outcomes associated with the obstacles faced by students who do not have adequate access to university education, those who manage to enter but shortly drop-out, and those who struggle with their studies and university life and barely manage to conclude their programmes.
- 8) Creation of more conducive campus environments and adoption of curriculum and pedagogical innovations that would enhance the academic performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

#### **Conclusion**

So far, this discussion has demonstrated the empirical evidence about differentials in admissions, drop-out rates, repetition and that academic achievement between different social and spatial categories of university students is full of gaps. It has equally become more apparent that students in Nigeria from middle and high income backgrounds generally tend to have lower drop-out and repetition rates than those from poorer-backgrounds. Other available evidence is suggestive of academic performance differentials by spatial location and clearly indicates that university graduates enjoy greater occupational and social status enhancement than non-graduates. It can therefore be safely concluded that university education is a major vehicle for socio-economic mobility for its beneficiaries who are increasingly those of middle-to-high socio-economic status.

#### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations have been suggested:

- 1) Nigeria should collaborate with other countries in Africa in the Air Virtual University Project (situated in Nairobi, Kenya) as a way of providing answers to the problem of demand and access to university education.
- 2) More efforts to licence private universities should be pursued (Oyebade et al, 2005).
- 3) While expanding access and ensuring quality, quality university education should be assured through regular funding, staffing development, monitoring and accreditation programmes on offer in order to justify the objective of university education which are teaching, research, development and community service.
- 4) The distant learning and National Open University options should be invigorated beyond the present superficial levels to eliminate the present problems of inadequate classrooms accommodation and boarding.
- 5) To improve access to university education, institutions should develop adaptive behaviour to provide academic and other support to an increasingly diverse student body, and to develop retention strategies that lead to completion of studies (Saint, et al 2004).
- 6) Loan scheme opportunities with established modalities of repayment should be re-introduced to encourage indigent but brilliant students not to dropout or waste away.
- 7) Employing organizations that stand to gain in this knowledge economy should be encouraged to draw investment support programmes of sponsorship to deserving students with long term plan to train and employ.

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