

Equalizing Educational Opportunity in Nigeria Through Open and Distance Learning

Theme: Social Justice
Sub-theme: Scaling up Quality Education for All

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Introduction

Education has been universally acknowledged as a potent and dynamic instrument for national development and social transformation. It is an important instrument for the development of the individual and the society as it is a weapon against poverty, illiteracy, and disease. In Nigeria, the importance of education in the development of the individual and the nation is highly recognized. Education according to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is a fundamental human right and the key factor to promoting sustainable development. Education as seen by Erese (1983) is "a birth right and not a privilege of every citizen of any country". The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004) defines education as that process that helps to develop the whole being, physically, mentally, morally, politically, socially and technologically to enable individuals function in any environment in which they may find themselves. As a process, education involves the development of the individual at various levels of educational institutions. The policy added that access to education and training is not only basic human right but also a key factor for social progress and in reducing the gap between socio-economic groups and sexes. The policy also made provision for equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.

Statement of the Problem

Reports by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), which conducts the selection examinations to higher institutions in Nigeria, show that the Nation is still unable to meet the social demands for universities, notwithstanding 104 available universities (27 federal, 36 state and 41 private). JAMB has reported that 61 percent of the 1,375,652 candidates who wrote the examinations in the 2010/2011 academic session scored 180 (required minimum score) out of 400, which means 839,147 candidates are eligible for admissions into conventional higher institutions. It is common knowledge that all the tertiary institutions combined cannot accommodate more than about 500,000 new students. This means there is excess of about 339,147 candidates who are qualified but will not be admitted because there is no space, plus another estimated 370,000 who did not make up to 180. It is sad to know that more than half of those who sat for the examinations, about 700,000 will be left in the cold. Bello-Osagie (2010) has aptly described the scenario with the right phrase 'what a waste' and noted that similar statistics has been on yearly basis in the past five years. It is quite obvious that these young people have been deprived access to education because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional classroom. It is also obvious that due to limitations in both human and material resources, conventional institutions can no longer satisfy the snowballing population of a country like Nigeria, which has an estimated population of 140 million people and an average annual population growth rate of 2.38% (World Fact Book, 2006). Again, there are people who desire education but due to one challenge or the other tend to be excluded from access to education thus limiting their career prospects. However, the emergence of Open and Distance Learning has marked a turning point in the provision of educational opportunities for millions of people that have been left out of the conventional system.

Concepts of Equity, Equality

Equity, according to Obanya (2009), implies equal chances, equal treatment and equal gains. Olanrewaju (1987) argues that biological equality is in consonance with John Locke's and Rousseau's view that all men are equal. As argued by Salawu (1995), the idea of equality means that all persons are born equal and are treated equally irrespective of their social status. However, he added that nature itself initiates inequality and therefore not every inequality is unjust. Salawu further argued that educational inequality arising from difference in choices, ability and virtues are just, while educational inequality prompted by sex, social class, race, state of origin, disability, and religion, are unjust.

The idea of equality with reference to education means equal rights for all irrespective of any circumstances by way of birth, race, sex, tribe, and disability. As stated in the National Policy on Education, the Nigerian's philosophy of education is based on the integration of the individual into a sound, effective, and equal educational opportunities for all citizens. The philosophical assumption underpinning the policy is for every Nigerian child to have full access to quality education at all levels. The United Nations and the federal government of Nigeria have recognized education as a fundamental human right. Unfortunately, the right to education and thus equal opportunity to education as a national objective for development has not been achieved.

Disparity in Nigerian Educational System

Over the years, Nigeria has expressed commitment to education with the belief that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance will form a basis for accelerated national development. However, regardless of the incontrovertible evidence that education is crucial to the development of the community and the nation, there remain inequalities in access to education. Despite its potential for leveling opportunities, education is used to perpetrate inequalities. For instance, millions of poor people are still being excluded from the processes and outcomes of education. Concerns have been expressed on the glaring gap between the North and the South with regards to education. While the Northern region is alleged to be educationally disadvantaged, the Southern part is seen as educationally favoured. There is also gender disparity in the system, disparities between demand and supply, disparities between urban and rural schools, and between educational institutions owned and controlled by the Federal Government and those owned and controlled by the States and private agencies. The list is endless. This is why Teboho Moja (2000) in his assessment of the situation concludes that the entire system reflects privilege and differentiation.

Table 1: Number of candidates that sat for JAMB Examinations 2008 across selected states in Nigeria showing disparity in education between the North and South

S/N	Southern States	Number of Candidates	%	Northern States	Number of Candidates	%
1	Imo	101,201	9.6	Taraba	5,582	0.53
2	Anambra	72,722	6.89	Sokoto	4,926	0.47
3	Delta	71,722	6.73	Jigawa	3,987	0.38
4	Edo	60,714	5.76	Zamfara	3,826	0.36
5	Akwa Ibom	52,635	4.99	FCT	1,726	0.16
6	Abia	49,810	4.72	Yobe	703	0.07

Source: JAMB Records 2008

Table 1 presents the sad reality of the education imbalance between the North and the South. In 2008, for instance, it was reported that a total number of 998,114 candidates wrote the JAMB exam held across the country. The first six states with the highest number of candidates are all from the South. They are Imo with 101,201 candidates, representing 9.6% of the total; Anambra 72,722 (6.89%); Delta - 71,722 (6.73%); Edo - 60,714 (5.76%); Akwa Ibom - 52,635 (4.99%) and Abia - 49,810 (4.72%). The last six states with the lowest number of candidates are all from the North. The states are Taraba with 5,582 candidates (0.53%); Sokoto - 4,926 (0.47%); Jigawa - 3,987 (0.38%);

Zamfara – 3,826 (0.36%); Federal Capital Territory (FCT) – 1,726 (0.16%) and Yobe with just 703 candidates (0.07%).

In attempt to address the disparity challenge, the federal government has made concerted efforts through various educational programmes to remedy the educational gap. The question remains to what extent have these efforts achieved the much desired equity and equality in education?

Practical Attempts to Equalize Educational Opportunity in Nigeria

The population of Nigeria is 140 million according to the last Population census (Hugh, 2006). The inability of the available Universities in Nigeria to cope with the high demand for University education has put much pressure on university admissions. In response to the strong social demand, the federal government has developed strategies on how to achieve equal opportunity in education. Among the strategies are: Bursary and scholarship awards; Universal Basic Education (UBE) initiative. The federal government also took steps to expand access. Among its more notable policy actions have been: (i) increasing the number of federal universities, (ii) expanding enrollments through the UBE initiative, (iii) introducing admissions quota system to address regional and class imbalances, (iv) launching bursary/scholarship program for needy students, (v) approving the establishment of private universities, and (vi) announcing the establishment of National Open University. The latter two actions are said to be particularly significant as they signaled steps towards the healthier diversification of a previously rather standardized system. In Nigeria, because of her specific need for even development and national unity, political consideration has dominated attempt at equality of educational opportunities.

The Quota System and the Principle of Fairness and Social Justice

The 1979 constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria guarantees equality and equity for all citizens. The educational gap between Northern and Southern Nigeria as earlier pointed out is a trace of educational inequality, which started since the inception of western education. To address this, the quota system was introduced into the admission process. However, the system is viewed as a clear case of robbing Peter to pay Paul as it has continued to create educational imbalance between the North and the South thus engendering ill feeling and social injustice among its citizens. The attempt to rectify the so-called educational inequality via quota system often violates the very principle of fairness and justice, which it is supposed to uphold. It is viewed that the error it presupposes to correct by making the educationally backward areas catch up with the educationally more advanced areas is still noticed. The South, which is not at advantage with the system feel cheated out. It will be difficult to convince such candidates seeking admission that they are living in a country where there is fairness and equal opportunity for every citizen. Obviously, the rationalization that the quota system would promote unity is hardly derived in practice. What then is the way forward?

Open and Distance Learning as a Strategy for Equalizing Educational Opportunity

In many countries, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methods have become an effective and equitable means of providing learning for people in all situations and of all ages. The development of Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria has indeed been a revolution to the problems of education. ODL is the mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teacher. It uses variety of media and technologies to provide and improve access to quality education for large numbers of learners wherever they may be.

The term ODL reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and its aim is to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The desire to anchor as much as possible to the train of globalization demands that all sectors of society must be literate and this kind of mass education can only be afforded through the distance-learning scheme. Jegede (2003) observed that all nations of the world desirous of a cost-effective, convenient,

conducive, efficient and comprehensive way to educate all its citizens have embraced Open and Distance Learning.

National Open University of Nigeria

The flagship of tertiary institution for Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria is the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) which was established by the National Assembly Act of 1983, it got suspended and later resuscitated in 2002 while functional activities commenced in 2003. Establishment of NOUN was timely for the thousands of otherwise qualified Nigerians who needed a university education but were denied access to the existing conventional universities.

The vision of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is to be regarded as the foremost university providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. Its mission is to provide functional, cost effective, flexible, learning which adds lifelong value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. Specifically, NOUN's vision and mission depict the mandate of providing access and ensuring quality in the educational services that are rendered to the students. NOUN reflects a novel development in the provision of higher education in Nigeria. It is the first full-fledged university that operates in an exclusively open and distance-learning (ODL) mode of education and delivers its course materials via print in addition with information and communication technology (ICT).

In line with the purpose of this paper, data were obtained from the Academic Records to examine the extent NOUN has lived up to its mandate as articulated in its vision and mission. The paper focuses on disadvantaged individuals, those who tend to be excluded from access to education in conventional institutions due to their perceived limitations, herein referred to as 'Special Learners'. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of this category of individuals who are registered as regular students of NOUN.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of Special Learners in NOUN

S/N	Category	Frequency	%
1	Girls and women in <i>pardah</i>	12	0.02
2	The physically challenged	417	0.76
3	Those in employment	43,606	80.4
4	Older students who have passed the age of admission into regular universities	33,209	61.3
5	Married adolescent girls	16	0.03
7	Those studying Access Programme to remedy their deficiencies	1,752	3.2
8	Lifelong Learners acquiring skills in various occupations	1,790	3.3
9	Prison inmates	13	0.02

Source: Students Records Data Base NOUN 2010

The overall student population in NOUN is currently 54, 179. Among these, Table 1 shows that girls and women in *Purdah* make up 12, representing 0.02% of the total population; the physically challenged - 417 (0.76%); those in employment - 43,606 (80.4%); older students - 33,209 (61.3%); married adolescent girls -16 (0.03%); those studying Access Programme to remedy their deficiencies - 1,752 (3.2%); Lifelong Learners 1,790 (3.3%) and prison inmates - 13 (0.02%).

Evidence presented in Table 1 shows that NOUN has taken practical steps towards promoting equal educational opportunity and empowering people who are perceived disadvantaged in various ways. It has provided education to reach the hitherto un-reached segment of the population especially those who may have been denied access in conventional system on the basis of one social consideration or the other. NOUN came to the rescue and affords them the opportunity to embark on courses of their

choice within their vicinity and without contradicting any societal dictates. They are being trained and given the opportunity to contribute their own quota to national development.

As observed in Table 1, the population of students in the following categories is relatively low - girls and women in *pardah*, married adolescent girls, and prison inmates - compared to other categories. It is however certain that the population will continue to increase given NOUN's commitment to its vision and mission as well as level of outreach sensitization campaign.

Recommendations /Achieving Greater Equity in Education

1. To ensure educational equality in Nigeria, it is necessary that all inequalities and discrimination based on sex, state, religion, tribe, language and certain traditional and cultural practices be abolished
2. There is need for NOUN to widen its outreach enlightenment campaign to target rural dwellers particularly girls and women, the nomads, and other hard-to-reach members of the society, as neglecting them would amount to inequity and injustice
3. Educational institutions offering ODL should be encouraged to expand the scope of their programmes to meet the needs of various categories of disadvantaged members of the society
4. Government should subsidize ODL programmes to allow indigent learners have access to quality education
5. Government should base admission policy entirely on merit
6. All the laws promoting equal opportunities in access to education should be popularized for every Nigerian child to know she or he has a right to educational opportunities and take advantage of it
7. The Nigerian Government should recognize the high premium placed on education in National Development and ensure that every Nigerian child especially the girl-child has access to functional education

Conclusion

This paper has clearly demonstrated the important role played by NOUN as an ODL institution in providing equal educational opportunity for large number of people who have been left out of the conventional system. Through ODL, Nigerian people are beginning to enjoy equal opportunity to attain educational heights without intervening barriers of age, gender, disability, socio-economic status, ethnic background, and geographic location.

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