



# Expanding Access to Education Opportunity in Nigeria: Matters Arising

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## Abstract

Access to education in Nigeria has become a thoughtful issue of discourse in understanding the expanding access to educational opportunity to students in Nigeria. This paper examines the matters arising from access to education that involves some conceptual clarification which entails, equal educational opportunity, access to educational opportunity, achieving access to educational opportunity, expanding access, expanding access to open and distance education in Nigeria, obstacles in expanding access to educational opportunity in Nigeria, differences between urban and rural area, existence of special schools, level of intelligence, gender issues, cultural factors, economic factors and matters arising. In view of this, it was essentially recommended that efforts should be made to invigorate the present state of continuing education centres in Nigeria to expand access to educational opportunity.

**Keywords:** Access, Education, Opportunity, Expanding, Matters Arising.

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## INTRODUCTION

Access to educational opportunities is a right of every citizen in Nigeria, as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). It provides, with respect to the nation's educational objectives that: Government shall through its policy ensure that equal and adequate educational opportunities are provided at all levels. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees equality and equitable opportunities to all citizens. Though, the educational gap between urban and rural dwellers in Nigeria is dated back to educational inequality in

Nigeria, since the foundation of western education in the country (Okoli, 2007). However, Nigerian policy of access to higher education is aimed at equal educational opportunities to all citizens of the country. The policy aims at giving equal educational opportunities at the higher education level (Chimombo, 2005). As the higher education system expands, the request of who benefits from the participation, and the consequent constitutional rights it offers, becomes critical. As Watson suggests, ‘the one absolutely iron law about widening participation is that if you want the system to be fairer it has to be allowed to expand’ (Watson, 2005, p. 56).

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

### Equal Educational Opportunity

Equal educational opportunity is concerned with expanding access to every individuals in any society. It suggests the removal of that level, otherwise type of inequality which is considered undesirable or improper within the society. Equality of educational opportunities means that an individual has equal access to education. Equality of educational opportunities is one of the goals of the philosophy of Egalitarianism. However, inequality of educational opportunities exists throughout the world. Obayan (2009) posits that equity suggests equal treatment and equal advantages to individuals in the society. Ofoha (2010) suggest that the idea of equality with regards to education means equal rights to all regardless of any circumstances by way of birth, race, sex, tribe or challenges (disability).

Therefore, giving to the national policy on education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004), the Nigeria’s philosophy of education is based on “equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system. This translates that in order to attain a free, just and egalitarian society, Nigeria requires an atmosphere that is conducive enough to accommodate equal educational opportunities for all citizens at all levels. In essence, the principle of equality in education has the following features:

- Education should be free, universal and compulsory to some extent;
- No one should be left out for one reason or the other from opportunities of education and of fund in public education;
- Equal social benefits – benefits of access to higher education, finance, influence, position, amenities and other social needs;
- Equal educational benefits – learning outcomes, knowledge, and skills-knowledge and skill achievable in private schools should also be available in public schools;
- Equal educational treatment – procedure and practices should be equal in all educational institutions, be it private or public and at all levels;
- Equal distribution of resources and facilities – particularly teaching and learning facilities – chairs, desks, classrooms, machines, tools, workshops, laboratories, equipment libraries, books, etc.;
- Equal opportunity to a large number of people for earnings through education – job opportunity for a large number of educated people.

The notion of equal educational opportunity is that the delivery of education to individuals ought to be completely based on capability. Thus, it entails the elimination of all non-natural barriers to education whether parental affluence, race, geographical location, religious belief or social status. Thus, in employment process, or admission to schools should not be centred on race, religion, ethnic, social or economic affluence but only on ability and capability.

### **Access to Educational Opportunity**

Access to education is the opportunity that every Nigeria child ought to receive freely from their parents or guardians that owe them the responsibility to enrol and facilitate the entry and encourage, sustain the enrolment of the learner in appropriate education programme. Thus, logical notion underlying the 2004 education policy is that every Nigerian child will have a full access to quality education with academic or technical aptitude of individuals as the limiting factor. The consequence of this is that every Nigerian child would be given the opportunity to receive the best education that would make them self-sufficient and self-supportive to the limit of their ability regardless of the economic, political and religious prominence of the parents. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) defines access as “making it possible for everyone who is entitled to education to receive it”. UNESCO (2003) also defines access to tertiary education as “ensuring equitable access to tertiary education institutions which is based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance...”. Access to education is making sure that all the sections of the society get fair share of any kind of educational opportunities that is available to the society (Ene, 2005).

### **Attempts in Achieving Access to Educational Opportunity**

Government has made effort to put in some measures in an attempt to make educational opportunity accessible by all citizens in Nigeria. The effort put in place is the establishment of Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) Decree No. 2 of 1978, now called Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), Distance Learning, Private Universities, Universal Basic Education and National Open University these institutions are established to close the gap in access to education and uphold a continued removal of access-inequality into universities in Nigeria. This quota system was introduced to consider the predominantly education backward states and to give them the opportunity to access education.

Thus, some states in Nigeria were given special preference ironically called “Catchment Area” it is necessitated to strike a balance between the educational advantaged and disadvantaged states in the country. Federal Character Commission (1996) posits that lowering the entering qualification of the states considered disadvantaged, indigene and non-indigene dichotomy, or what JAMB calls the catchment area will encourage access to education in Nigeria. Ekundayo and Ajayi (2009) stated that the quota system and catchment area policies ensure equity and fairness in the admission processes. However, Oduwaiye (2011) advised that much as it is moral that the educationally disadvantaged area is being encouraged, it should not be at the detriment of others in a situation where a candidate does not gain access just because of his birthplace which is not too good.

Universities quota system admission policies on catchment area, consist of amelioration of the disadvantaged educationally less developed states, among others. The admission policy requires that a ratio of (60: sciences), (arts: 40) be sustained. Therefore, the entry qualification is

fixed at five credits in not more than two sittings. The federal government guidelines for admissions into its institution of higher learning are based on basic essentials such as academic merit determined by the UME score, and 45% of students' admissions are selected to it. Academically (education) less developed areas are given 20%, catchment areas have 25%, and 10% to the decision of the Vice Chancellor of National Universities Commission (NUC; 1999) which is the quota system. This suggests that 45% of the available admission earmarked for candidates with very high (score) marks. These sets of candidates are first considered for first choices admission course into the institution. The catchment areas of 25%, are for candidates within the geographical and socio-cultural location of the institution of the candidate.

Most of the federal universities have all the states as their catchment areas, while other federal universities consider only their neighboring states as catchment areas. This suggest that, all state-owned institutions have all local government areas as their catchment areas. It appears to be real that government had made numerous attempts at rectifying the inequity in access to education opportunities in Nigeria. One prominent way rationalized by government introduction was the quota system to admission methods. It was necessitated to assist the disadvantaged areas mostly the Northerners. As postulated, the educational gap between Northern and Southern Nigeria could be trace to educational inequality, which started at the inception of western education in Nigeria (Moti, 2010).

Considerably, it is good that disadvantaged education regions are been encouraged, but not at the detriment of other qualified ethnic groups. Circumstances where a candidate does not gain access just for the reason of his birth place is not good. Contrarily, Akpan and Undie (2007) opposes that using the quota system to guide and regulate access to university education has an unfair effect; the entire system reflects privilege and differentiation. This is an attempt to represent another source of intended denials from educational opportunities for many Nigerian students.

The license of individuals to operate private universities was an attempt to give access and opportunity for people to gain admission into tertiary education. As required government considered an increase access to tertiary institution by permitting private participation in tertiary education and granted these capitalists licenses to operate universities so long as they meet National University Commission (NUC) requirements. The establishment of these private universities was disadvantaged to most students seeking admission into these tertiary institutions because of high cost of tuition fees (Moti, 2010). Thus, persons from a low income earning home still find it very difficult to access or afford a university education due to the hug financial involvement on admission. Odetunde (2006) "hard work and excellence was no longer the yardstick by which access was measured but political connection and financial power".

Payment of tuition fees was impossible for low income earners. Hence, unequal access to higher education transform to another facet with new antennae. The children of the bourgeois with political connections are able to pay admission fees into private universities and continue to enjoy access to quality education with high standards to teaching facilities. This development is yet to close the vacuum created by government own tertiary institutions as occasioned by the limited numbers of tertiary education in the states (Odetunde, 2006) rather they make parents ability to sponsor private university education another yardstick for measuring social status and class.

To achieve the aforementioned, the Federal Republic of Nigeria stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) that: Nigeria's philosophy of education therefore is based on:

- The development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen;
- The full integration of the individual into the community; and
- The provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system.

There are five main philosophical goals which Nigeria education should promote, which are building of:

- Free, compulsory and universal primary education;
- Free secondary education;
- Free university education; and
- Free adult literacy programme.

Establishment of schools of Basic studies or remedial programmes in some higher institutions located in northern states that are educationally backward is another way to equalize educational opportunity by enabling individuals from those educationally backward states to improve and secure admission to tertiary institutions. The establishment of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes in Nigeria can be argued to be of abundant impact as they are steps towards 'lifelong education' as contained in the National Policy on Education (2004). The Nigeria Open University, as posited Ofoha (2010) has been up to its mandate. Some northern states have taken some steps towards reducing inequalities in education due to sex by declaring free education for female students in some courses. If this move is fully carried out, it will improve female educational balances, thus reducing the gap between males and females in some northern states. The formation of National Commission for Normadic Education by the Federal Government to take care of the education of the children of Normads and migrant fishermen is another milestone in achieving equal educational opportunity in this country if the intended objectives could be achieved.

### **Expanding Access**

The idea of expanding access to education is to make education available and close to the citizenry either in the rural or urban area. Therefore, access to education provides an enabling environment that is geared towards creating opportunity for people to delve into the understanding of the value involved in being educated. Expanding access to education is an integral part of human society that requires government being fully involved in the provision and de-centralization of educational institutions such as tertiary institution, secondary and primary education within state and local areas of the country. Thus, access to education reveals the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms that everyone has a right to education. Providing access to education guarantee everyone entitlement to be educated in the society. This implies that the rights or opportunity and process of making education available within the reach of every citizen of a nation is sure to be provided (Enaohwo, 2008).

Okeke (2009) posits that access to education in its full and extensive sense means free and unrestricted, unimpeded and unregulated opportunities at every level of education to attain knowledge, expertise, and abilities available at the desired level to optimally participate and contribute to development in the society. Okeke (2009) further maintained that this definition of

access to education covers the threshold of access/ enrolling, attending and completing and possibly transiting to the appropriate level of education. Thus, lack of expansion to access education means any of the following: failing to register in an educational institution; lack of opportunities to attend school regularly; does not complete the prescribed programme of study; does not have opportunities required to attain the deserved goals; and lacks opportunities of passage to the next level of education.

Access to education would mean the extent to which individuals have access uninterrupted and opportunities to acquire university education in Nigeria. Okebukola (2008) higher education provides high level human resources for driving the economy and ensuring rapid societal transformation. That is, the greater the opportunity given to the citizenry for higher education, the more expansive the horizon for rapid social and economic development. This opportunity is in the form of the higher education participation rate, which is defined as the proportion of 18-35 years age group that is enrolled in tertiary education (Okebukola, 2008).

### **Expanding Access to Open and Distance Education in Nigeria**

The idea of expanding access to education through Open and Distance Education in Nigeria is necessitated because of equality in the access to education, very few people have the privilege to gain access to education due to inaccessibility and unaffordable capacity of education in Nigeria. The challenges faced by people in the society with regards to gaining access to education vary considerably from one level to another; such as:

- The majority of the people live within the average poverty level, which translates into not been able to attend urban based institutions despite providing the prerequisite.
- Girl child early marriage and religious belief in most part of the country deprive the majority of female gender from higher education. Moreover, there are some factors like physical disabilities, remoteness of localities, outrageous tuition fees in some private universities. These are some of the challenges responsible for millions of Nigerians that are disadvantaged of higher education in spite of their keen interest and admissibility.

Therefore, it is a clear expression that expanded access to education through open and distance education will without doubt provide opportunities for higher education to those who are deprived because there is poor distribution of educational institution in Nigeria. Human resources are on the increase in Nigeria that requires to be given human capital development training to contribute to the economic development of the nation.

### **Obstacles in Expanding Access to Educational Opportunity in Nigeria**

Amongst numerous is the license of individuals to operate and manage private institution which has cause obstacles to people from gaining admission or access to tertiary institution in Nigeria. There are indications why most persons find it difficult to pay the financial involvement in tertiary institutions. Igbuzor (2006) in a study conducted by Action Aid published in 2003 in its findings observed that the reason why scholars do not go to schools include high cost of tuition fees, health challenge and hunger and educational background of parents. Unpreparedness of government on its part in job creation for young graduates also has generated some doubt in the mind of many. Rose (1998) and Igbuzor (1992) listed the categories of children who tend to be

excluded from the formal schooling system, they include; children of low income earning home, children of politically disadvantage minority, children of migrant families, orphans, children affected by HIV/AIDS, children from broken homes and those with physical or mental challenges.

### **Differences between Urban and Rural Areas**

There is unfairness in the distribution or allocation of material resources for teaching and infrastructure to schools in rural areas by government of Nigeria. In the urban areas, there are usually abundant social amenities, and standard and well equipped schools compared with inadequacy teaching resources and poorly equipped library in the schools in rural areas. This situation is against the backdrop of comparing children studying in schools in the rural areas that are disadvantage due to the poor quality of instructional materials used in teaching, ventilated class room, electricity, computer, quality chairs, teaching staff common room and laboratories like agricultural science, biology, physics, chemistry and however, they have to compete with the educationally improved children in urban areas whose schools are well equipped coming together to write the same public examinations and qualifying tests for admission into tertiary institutions. It is important to note that the output of this different type of students will definitely not be comparable in result output.

### **Existence of Special Schools**

Government inability to equip the school is another challenge that requires urgent attention as part of its responsibility to provide the needed facilities in the school and a better learning environment as it is expedient that teaching resources should be provided in the school to enhance good learning condition. However, these special schools are owned by individuals and are well equipped compare to what is seen in public schools. Because of this high tuition imposed by the stakeholders of the school it apparently suggests that the school is intended for the children of the bourgeois instead of all and sundry. Hence, the survival of special schools in the state institutes additional obstacle to equal educational opportunity in the country. These special schools are of different classifications but definite things are common to them – they request for very high fees, have adequate and highly experienced staff, standard teaching resources and conducive school environment. The high cost of the schools makes it difficult for the children of lower income home to have admission into the schools because they are very expensive. Situations when children from these special schools sit for public examination, there are likelihood that students from the special school will do better than the children from public schools. Based on these two facts, obstacles will definitely play out in the realization of equal educational opportunity. Amaele (2003) cited Ajayi (1993) who sees private schools in Lagos built for the rich, therefore:

The schools premises ... are enough to lure a willing soul to reading. With big trees to provide breeze and shades from the tropical sun of Lagos, airy classrooms and the beautiful surroundings, the schools contrasts sharply with the dilapidated, dirty and repulsive buildings of the public schools (p.28).

## **LEVEL OF INTELLIGENCE**

Acumen may perhaps be a by-product of genetics or environment. Thus, two individuals with same innate intelligence will not necessarily have the same level of intelligence improvement if their environment is not the same. Better surroundings contribute to improvement in school compare to those raised or nurtured in a pitiable environment. People raised in these two environments can barely have equal opportunity to education (Briggs & Ololube, 2015a).

Briggs and Ololube (2015b) opined that increase in family have emotional impact on intelligence of an individual, meaning that an individual from a large family most times hardly gets the much needed attention from the parents because of too many responsibilities to respond to in respect to individual wants in the family. Therefore, family size may possibly affect the growth of his or her inborn capabilities, which will in turn lead to a reduced chance of development in school compared to another child from a smaller sized household. The assertion is that when family size is small, children have the chances of interacting more with their parents because there is likelihood of getting the required attention and it also benefits them to acquire educational knowledge if the parents are academically sound to assist them in their assignment. Most time it is difficult to give attention to all the children in a large family (Briggs, Ololube & Kpolovie, 2014).

## **GENDER ISSUES, CULTURAL FACTORS, ECONOMIC FACTORS**

### **Gender Issues**

At different levels, there have been worries about equity in access to education and gender disparities are increasing. In Nigeria, as elsewhere in the world, the level of female enrolment and their access particularly at the second and third levels of education system is low. Osagie (2008) observed that the female enrolment at the primary level of education was low and could have impact on the university education. At the regional level, the results of several studies conducted showed that the average male enrolment is higher than the female except in South East (Atuora, 2006). Disparity also existed in gender enrolment in the university in Nigeria across the geo-political zones and disciplines. It was noted that there was a steady increase in the rate of female enrolment, but it was insignificant (Imogie & Eraikhuemen 2008; Adeyemi & Akpotu, 2004).

### **Cultural Factors**

The acceptable way of life of a people impact in their attitude to access education, however, culture influences individuals in their ideology concerning any aspect of life. Gender issues in Nigeria circle around societal beliefs, culture, religion and economic factors. Gender inequality in education does not revolve around political propaganda but with realities that cushion the effect on the genders. It is not about how many women that are involved in politics and governance or trying to meet the affirmative agenda, it is also not about building isolated schools for both genders. Moreover, it is not the levels of educational achievement of boys and girls, nor the female/male proportion of the population. Equal access to education and retention of these students is not even the issue. But what is to be considered critically as some of the causes of inequality in genders are:

- The parental inclination for educating each of the genders because of culture and trade-economic reasons. Therefore, economically it is believed that an educated female would be more useful in the family though traditional and cultural practices support the preference for educating the male child who will succeed the father and sustain the lineage; and
- Culture and social practices is another reason for gender inequality in education. In the northern part of Nigeria the female child are sheltered and groomed, culture for early marriage, whereas the young Igbo males preferred to be entrepreneurs to make money and get rich timely, however, leading to their dropping out of school for business, trading, hawking, apprenticeship, etc.

## **MATTERS ARISING**

The universal basic education as introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria, has been termed as impressive but it seems that some issues are left unsettled which probably truncated the live-wire of the programme like universal primary education scheme. As the name implies that universal basic education in general would have advocated that every child in Nigeria is presume to have access to basic education without any sort of prevention. More so, a limit to which students are admitted was placed by each state as directed by federal government. Enemuo (2000) this quota limitation, according to the national co-ordinator, was informed by the differential level of illiteracy in the states of the federation. Universal Basic Education is a necessary and impressive venture as embarked by the Federal Government of Nigeria. It is observable that the causes of failure in programme – the Universal Primary Education scheme are still significantly available which are:

- Lack of proper planning;
- Inability to project the estimated number of students;
- Lack of knowledge of the number of teachers that will be required;
- Incompetence to estimate the cost of providing the accurate number of school buildings;
- Learning facilities and the financial implication of the entire programme; and Quota admission policy that is being introduced with the scheme.

These are some of the factors that could lead to unworkable situation in the smooth management of the Universal Basic Education scheme.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is indeed very necessary for Nigeria to expand in the equality of provision of educational opportunity, also diversity in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic development of the people should be taken into consideration while trying to expand educational opportunity for the interest of the people. To make the equal educational opportunity a reality the government need to design a core curriculum, programmes, teaching methods and also make available teaching resources to facilitate learning and increase students' likelihoods of attaining success.

Therefore, it is possible to attain greater access to university education in Nigeria, if areas of waste are curtailed and resources preserved are used towards expanding the existing facilities to accommodate an increased number of students in Nigerian universities. The opportunity of

decentralizing education through open and distance learning in the university has a way of increasing access to university education. Thus, Open and Distance Learning is a sustainable means of overcoming the challenges of gender inequality in education. It also serves as a medium of bringing education to the door post of prospective students in areas such as; homes, offices, shops, etc. It is a process of democratizing education by providing unrestricted access, irrespective of the existence of social obstacles such as gender, economic status, disability, geographical location, religious/ethnic disposition.

## Recommendations

Based on the matter discussed, recommendations are made as follows:

- Efforts should be made to invigorate the present state of continuing education centres in Nigeria to expand access to educational opportunity.
- The principle of meritocracy should not be forfeited at the altar of quota system and catchment area arrangement.
- The policies which increase access and opportunities like the Open University and Distance Learning System must be encouraged.
- The establishment of continuing education for the nation should be strengthened, and the recognised difficulties should be improved upon for proper utilization in expanding access to education opportunities expanding in Nigeria.
- School fees and other relevant levies should be paid at a minimum amount in all Universal Basic Education schools in order to allow all Nigerian children regardless of tribe and family circumstance to have a financial stress free education process from primary to junior secondary school classes.
- Adequate number of qualified teachers should be hired for all the classes and curriculum at all levels of the school system and occupational centres so as to guarantee competence in the school system.
- The primary and junior secondary schools should be adequately equipped with teaching and learning facilities such as classrooms, furniture, projectiles, libraries, books, journals, laboratories as well as workshops.

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