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Quota system of admission: A catalyst or a hindrance to equal access to education in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the quota system of admission policy and the role it plays with regards to equal access to education in Nigeria. Implementation of quota system of admission was rationalized by the federal government of Nigeria on many grounds one of which is that its operations will help facilitate equal access to education in Nigeria by assisting school applicants from certain states of the country (believed to be faced with certain impediments) that otherwise limit their opportunity to obtain education. Nevertheless, when evaluated certain inherent problems seem to discredit the quota system of admission from being a competent measure for facilitating equal access to education. Such problems include violation of applicants' equal right to education and limitation of certain individuals' opportunities to access education due to their state of origin. As a result of these problems, the researchers contended that quota system of admission as implemented in the Nigerian educational sector does not facilitate equal access, rather it circuitously works against it. Therefore, it was suggested among other things that while the quest for equal access to education remains a priority in Nigeria, any policy directed at facilitating equal access to education must be made to function as a sword to deal with hindrances posed by any individual's socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender or religious inclinations and a shield to protect others from any negative and unintended implications as it regards access to education.

Keywords: Quota system of admission, catalyst, hindrance, education, and equal access to education

Introduction

Equal access to education is regarded as a requisite condition for individual and collective development. This is true as equal access to education guarantees each individual the freedom of opportunity to tap from the benefits accruable from education. According to Ojulari (2011) ^[17], equal access to education presupposes a condition where all school applicants are given equivalent treatment in accessing education, irrespective of their sex, race, religion, social class or disabilities. In a similar but clearer way, Okeke (2018) ^[18] describes equal access to education as free and unlimited, unhindered and unfettered opportunities at each level of education to obtain knowledge, skills and abilities available at that level needed to optimally participate and contribute to development in the society. The definitions above suggest that equal access to education is possible when such hindrances as: religion, race, social class, physical disabilities or sex are entirely blocked or reduced to the barest minimum from constituting any form of deterrent to individuals in their quest for obtaining formal or western type of education at any level. In other words, one could not be wrong to contemplate that inequalities in obtaining formal education as witnessed among states or regions in the postcolonial Nigeria could have stemmed from factors such as religion, race, social class, physical disabilities or sex pose to some individuals as well as possible inability of relevant authorities to decisively and adequately tackle such factors without unintended implications.

A critical look at Nigeria would again reveal that the origin of the problem of inequalities with regard to accessing education is also traceable to incidents that marked the inception of western education in Nigeria. According to Uruakpa & Ihebereme (2010) ^[25], response to western education was initially poor in Nigeria mainly because the southern part of Nigeria was mostly influenced by indigenous education (built on the culture of intimate association among children, parents and other elders, engaging in activities such as farming, fishing, basket making, weaving etc.), while the northern part was already influenced majorly by Koranic or Islamic education. For the above authors, the arrival of Christian missionary education otherwise known as formal or western education occasioned a culture conflict between western culture and that of the indigenous people of Nigeria and the condemnation of Nigeria's cosmological ideas with derogatory remarks also provoked many Nigerians to regard western culture/education as unworthy for their children.

Thus, western education at the onset especially in the southern part of the country was seen as a waste because receiving it means missing out on the needed intimate association with parents and other elders, absence from activities such as farming, fishing, basket making, weaving and consequent inability of the child to contribute to the maintenance of the family and society at large.

In spite of the initial rejection, western education eventually sailed through and became a symbol of progress and prestige. This became possible when the colonial administration had been stabilized and had created conditions which recognized and conferred respect on the early recipients of western education. So, receiving western education became a partway to becoming clerks, teachers, letter writers among others. At this time as Onwuka (2007)^[22] noted, the thought of material benefits rather than moral, encouraged a rapid increase in the spread and acceptance of western education especially in the southern part of Nigeria. But the fact that Christian missionaries were the brain behind the introduction of western education and that church buildings initially served as classrooms where religious instructions are also taught, the Muslim north were still very skeptical and slow to accept western education for the fear that their children could be converted to Christianity by such education (Fafunwa, 1974)^[11]. This over time created serious gap between the north and the south with regard to acquiring western education and as well resulted in uneven socioeconomic development (Olibie, Eziudo & Enueme, 2013)^[20].

This gap in educational advancement occasioned by the religious orientation of the northern part of Nigeria lingered until the age of industrialization, scientific and technological advancements when the Muslim intellectuals in the north realized the importance of western education and its potency in driving socioeconomic development of their people and region. But at this time access to western type of education was already largely in favour of the south who has more educational institutions as well as teachers in most of its states (Onyekwelu, 2018)^[23]. Based on the foregoing, the gap and consequent inequality in accessing education became serious problem in Nigeria. This problem went ahead to instigate persistent agitations and calls for bridging the gap and ensuring equal access to education in order to enable the educationally weak north and other states in the south achieve considerable level of educational advancement so as to be able to also have meaningful share of the socio-economic gains of western education. As a step in the right direction towards increasing access to education, deregulation of the educational sector was sanctioned to allow private individuals and institutions participate in the provision of educational services. Unfortunately, just as Enemu (2012)^[9] observed, educational services provided by private bodies or institutions were mostly costly and could not be easily accessed by many Nigerians. With this, the problem of widening educational gap and the need for equal access to education still remained potent in Nigeria. Thus, beyond the involvement of private sectors in the provision of educational services, the quota system principle was instituted as part of the measures to regulate admissions into federal government established schools.

Implementation of the quota system principle of admission is regarded as a necessary measure that will boost equal access to education in Nigeria by ensuring that school applicants especially those from educationally weak states

(predominantly made up of all the northern states of Nigeria) are assisted to have access to education in comparable terms with their counterparts from other areas of the country. Quota system as an affirmative measure is to last for a specific period of time (which is ten years) after which it will be disbanded. However, the quota system of admission even after more than thirty years of implementation is still adjudged by the federal government of Nigeria and the beneficiaries of the system as a necessary measure for promoting equal access to education as well as bridging the existing gap in the educational attainment of various parts of the country irrespective of the stiff opposition it has faced from most Nigerians (Ekundayo & Adedokun, 2019)^[8].

Given the above and the fact that quota system seems to have outlived its expected timeframe of ten years according to the then minister of education Jibril Aminu who stated that “no state would be regarded as educationally disadvantaged after ten years”, it becomes a worthwhile venture to attempt an appraisal of the policy of quota system of admission with the view to ascertaining its role as a catalyst for equal access to education in Nigeria all these of its implementation. However, in reasoned acquaintance with the axiom that the primary requirement for debating a thing is to first understand the actual thing being talked about, it will be proper before proceeding further that the major concept quota system of admission be clarified at this point for easy understanding.

Quota system of admission: A glossary look

Due to the controversies surrounding the implementation of quota system as a guide for school admission, there is to an array of definitions advanced. One of such definitions is given by Onyekwelu (2018)^[23] in which quota system principle is considered as a selection method for school admission whereby a certain percentage of those selected must be of a given ethnic or racial background and/or of a particular sex. In a similar trend of thought, quota system principle of admission is referred to as a process of allocating certain percentage of admission slots to different groups which mostly could be based on state of origin or ethnicity (Abdu & Joshua, 2019)^[1]. The above definitions indicate that in line with the quota system, school applicants are considered for admission on such criteria other than merit. Such criteria to be considered for admission include: state and/or local government of origin. Thus, in processing admission in line with quota system rules, the candidate's state or local government of origin plays a significant role with regard to who gains admission into federal government owned schools.

Some rules as outlined by the federal government of Nigeria in view of the implementation of the quota system principle of admission in unity secondary schools prescribes the following cutoff marks based on states: Abia state 130; Adamawa state 62; Akwa-Ibom state 123; Anambra state 139; Bauchi state 35; Bayelsa state 72; Benue state 111; Borno state 45; Cross River state 97; Delta state 131; Ebonyi state 112; Edo state 127; Ekiti state 119; Enugu state 134; Gombe state 58; Imo state 138; Jigawa state 44; Kaduna state 91; Kano state 67; Katsina state 60; Kebbi state 9 (male) 20 (female); Kogi state 119; Kwara state 123; Lagos state 133; Nasarawa state 58; Niger state 93; Ogun state 131; Ondo state 126; Osun state 127; Oyo state 127; Plateau state 97; Rivers state 118; Sokoto state 9 (male) 13

(female); Taraba state 3 (male) 11 (female); Yobe state 2 (male) 27 (female); Zamfara state 4 (male) 2 (female) and FCT Abuja 90 (Onyekwelu, 2020) [23].

At the tertiary level, the quota system of admission guidelines provides for forty-five percent (45%) of students' admissions to be based on merit as determined by the UTME scores, twenty (20%) for applicants from educationally disadvantaged areas, thirty-five percent (35%) for applicants from catchment areas (Ojulari, 2011) [17]. The above according to Omeje, Egwa and Adikwu, (2016) [21] imply that forty-five percent (45%) of the available spaces are reserved for applicants with very higher marks. These applicants are first given considerations for first choices of course and institution before others. Twenty percent (20%) of admission slots is to be reserved for applicants who are from states designated as educationally disadvantaged states.

Notably, all the nineteen (19) northern states predominantly make up the educationally disadvantaged areas of Nigeria. The catchment areas have thirty-five percent (35%) of the admission slots, and this is for applicants within the geographical and socio-cultural area hosting or contiguous to the institution of the applicant's choice. The above guidelines are geared toward facilitating equal access to education. At this point however, given the educational disparities that still exist in Nigeria in which case many individuals especially from the northern part of the country are still faced with various hindrances that seem to deny them similar opportunities to receive and utilize the gains of education, the question as to whether or not the application of quota system principle to school admission serves as a catalyst for equal access to education in Nigeria becomes inevitable (Enemuo, 2012) [9].

Quota system of admission: A catalyst or a hindrance to equal access to education in Nigeria?

Given the fact that equal access to education remains a major call on the lips of most Nigerians even after more than forty years of implementation of the quota system of admission in Nigeria educational sector, one wonders if the quota system of admission has been a catalyst or a hindrance to equal access to education. Accordingly, an attempt to first identify any possible way in which the quota system of admission serves or has served as a facilitator of equal access to education in Nigeria as claimed and rationalized by the federal government of Nigeria becomes imperative. According to Nwafor (2007) [13], the introduction of the quota system of admission in Nigeria's education system was premised on the notion that it will facilitate equal access to education by neutralizing certain impediments faced by many school applicants especially those from educationally disadvantaged areas. It indeed appeared to have been potent and helpful in neutralizing such impediments through rationing of admission slots as well as reducing entry-score requirements for school applicants who are from educationally disadvantaged states. With this, such impediments like state of origin, poor educational background possibly occasioned by poor socio-economic status as well as strong competition from other applicants with high socio-economic backgrounds and good educational foundation are greatly reduced. Improved opportunities to access education is ensured for applicants from disadvantages states in comparable terms with their counterparts from educationally advantaged states. The

above line of thought is corroborated by the submission of Owhonda and Kalagbor (2016) [24] that quota system of admission promotes egalitarianism and equalization educational opportunities.

Nonetheless, it is unfortunate to note that access to education made possible through quota system of admission comes with underlying problems of inequality. These problems justify the fears and doubts expressed by many Nigerians over possible unintended implications of the implementation of quota system of admission. Firstly, as Enemuo (2012) [9] posits, application of quota system to students' admissions denies some meritorious applicants of the freedom or rightful opportunity to gain admission. So, a major problem of the quota system of admission is that it works to limit the chances of some qualified school applicants by setting their entry-score requirements higher and in turn poses a hindrance to such school applicants who otherwise should enjoy unfettered opportunity to access education just like anyone else. Under the quota system of admission, entry score requirement for school applicants from states considered as educationally advantaged into unity secondary schools is set high.

The same applies to the universities due to the stiff competition to access the limited admission slots earmarked for the category these applicants fall under. Worthy of note is the fact that the forty percent (40%) of admission slot in federal universities that is based on merit is to be accessed by all applicants from both educationally advantaged and educationally disadvantaged states who meet up with the required entry score mark while the twenty percent (20%) of the admission slot is strictly reserved for applicants from educationally disadvantaged states. With this, the freedom of applicants especially those from states designated as "educationally advantaged state" is narrowed.

These applicants when they could not gain admission into school on the general merit or catchment area basis do not have alternative chance or opportunity of securing admission like their counterparts who still have opportunity of securing admission under the twenty percent (20%) admission slot reserved for applicants from educationally disadvantaged states. With this, such factor like state of origin under the quota system of admission is seen to promote inequality of freedom or opportunity to access education in Nigeria. How then can the gap in educational attainment among states in Nigeria be bridged when it is invariably widened?

This according to Enemuo (2014) [10] questions the viability of the quota system of admission as a catalyst for ensuring equal access to education in Nigeria. Of course, a measure that is to serve as a catalyst for promoting equal access to education cannot be one designed and utilized in a way that works to facilitate access to education in favour of particular school applicants and in the process hinder that of other applicants. Encumbering some applicants' freedom to access education at any level due to their state of origin is antithetical to equal rights. It really beats anyone's imagination as to the possibility of facilitating equal access to education in Nigeria through such admission system that violates individuals' rights to equal and adequate educational opportunities with no special regards to or against any applicant on the basis of ethnicity, state or local government of origin as provided for in sections 18 (1) and 42 (1) of the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria as amended.

Any policy that is meant to facilitate equal access to education must be one that upholds individuals' constitutional rights. Thus, given that quota system of admission limits the freedom of certain applicants whose rights to equal and adequate educational opportunities are also violated, the quota system of admission cannot be considered as a competent tool for facilitating equal access to education. Rather aligning with the view of Akpan and Undie (2007)^[4], the researchers submit that quota system of admission is among such pressing problems to be addressed in order to ensure equal access to education in Nigeria.

The Concept of Equality

The term equality implies the idea of being 'alike' is implied and may further connote the idea of close resemblance or identical relatedness, Nwafor (2010)^[14]. The word "equal" itself literally denotes same in terms of equality, degree and merit. In final analysis, we can talk of equality in terms of number as in mathematics and logic, the height or weight of individuals or objects the quality and status of person, and also in relation to achievement (success or failure). In this regard equality in the contest of this study would be viewed as a kind of treatment devoid of partiality and discrimination, i.e. the absence of preferential treatment in the placement of individuals in the same social, economic and political pedestal.

The Concept of Education

The concept of education is quite extensive and elusive because there is no universally accepted definition of it. This is due to the complexity of human nature, different educational theories and practice, etc. Hence, Nwafor (2007)^[13] viewed education as a chameleon because of its dynamic nature, it responds to the needs and aspirations of a social milieu, especially with regard to the cultural values, the changing social, economic and political situations and emerging new ideologies and technologies. (Okoh, 2003)^[19] viewed education as "an activity" which has teaching and learning as its touchstones. According to Amadioha (2010)^[6] education is an organized mechanism through which a society develops its human resources by equipping them with desirable skills, knowledge, attitudes and values which will enable them operate effectively in the social institutions of a given state or country. It should however be noted that education in its formal sense, implies the activities of the teacher and the learner, which aims at achieving a desirable development of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of the individual.

Educational Opportunity and its practice in Nigeria

Since the end of the Nigeria civil war, education became one the most politicized issues in our national life, (Nwafor, 2010)^[14]. This is true because during the Second Republic, The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was loud chanting "qualitative education" as her slogan, while the United Party of Nigeria (UPN) was busy implementing her "free education" at all levels. The implication was the creation of a gulf in terms of educational outcomes in favour of the (UPN) controlled states. On the other hands, Adesulu, (2014) observed that the attempt of creating equality in schooling as led to the breakdown in discipline and the problem of truancy, which has reached frightening proportions. He maintained that the ultimate result of this is "the alarming reports of inability to spell and do simple

arithmetic, and ignorance of basic geography and general knowledge".

Again, Nwafor, (2010)^[14] observed that scholarship schemes, the subsidized school fees, and other compensatory opportunities given by government are highly competitive based on the kind of aptitude test or some criteria for selection. In this case, inequality is perpetrated and to the detriment of the working class children and their rural counterparts.

Barriers to Educational Opportunities in Nigeria

Nwogu (2001)^[15] observed that selection method in admission at all levels through examinations is one of the barriers to equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. According to him, no country has succeeded in establishing the number of education institutions that can absorb all children of school going age and their different abilities and interests. Hence, common examinations are used as a means of selection into limited number of educational institutions. Such selection procedures based on merit encourages inequality instead of equality since those who are unable to pass these competitive examinations are deprived of their right to attend educational institution of their choice.

According to Nwogu (2001)^[15], religion and culture also act as a barrier to equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. Muslim parents are particularly reluctant for cultural and religious reasons to send their daughters to school. The implication is that equal educational programmes cannot be planned for all in Nigeria. Similarly, he also pointed out poor implementation of government lofty educational objectives as a barrier to equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. Nwafor, (2010)^[14] observed that the social class to which one belongs determines to a reasonable extent the chances (of succeeding or failing) that are open to him. Aluede, Idogho and Inonike, (2012)^[5] observed that one's membership of a particular social class could be as a result of natural or artificial phenomenon, or both. In this case, class poverty invariably could limit the chances of those born into the lower class in terms of basic necessities such as good food, education, shelter, conducive and inspiring environment, and other essential facilities. On the other hand, the sky is the limit of the life chances of the children from the middle and upper social classes, who have virtually all they need to succeed in life at their disposal, (Divine, 2011)^[7].

Another serious constraint on equal educational opportunity is that of the environment. There is a saying that the environment influences the development of the child to a great extent. It is a common knowledge that there is a yawning gap between the educational opportunities of children in the urban and rural areas. The urban children have almost all the facilities that give them advantage over the rural children, (Okeke, 2018)^[18].

Attempts to Equalization of Opportunities in Nigeria

It is worthwhile to outline some of the attempts made to bridge the gap between various disadvantaged states in Nigeria. According to Nwafor (2010)^[14], the first attempt was the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1955 by the then Western Region and in the Eastern Region in 1957. This did not last because of structural constraints in the planning and execution of the scheme. Secondly, special fund was created to accelerate the educational expansion in some disadvantaged state, without

necessarily slowing down the rate in other state. In addition, quota system of admission into tertiary institutions was introduced to tackle the issue of educational imbalance in Nigeria (Okeke, 2018) [18]. The implication of this system is obviously unfair, especially to the brilliant candidates from educationally advantaged states. Another attempt at equalization of educational opportunities in Nigeria was the establishment of schools of basic studies in educationally less advantaged states which aimed at producing qualified candidates for university admission through the Interim Joint Matriculation Board Examination (IJMBE) (Nwafor, 2010) [14]. Other government policies aimed at equalizing educational opportunities include the takeover schools from voluntary agencies in the late 1960s, the establishment of richly funded and adequately staffed colleges, especially the unity schools in every state of the federation, the introduction of universal basic education in 1999 and the current universal basic education (UBE). In addition, various governments in the federation introduced large scale scholarship schemes with a view to bringing education to the door-step of many Nigerians. All these measures to equalize educational opportunities have their implications (Nwafor, 2010) [14].

Who benefits most in equalization of Educational opportunities in Nigeria?

Most governments resist the urge to appear to be favoring particular individuals or groups when initiating policies which affect educational development of their countries. The reason is obvious. Discrimination in favour of certain ethnic groups is likely to cause considerable acrimony among the excluded group. The reverse is also true. Nwogu (2001) [15] is of the view that here is also the case of preferential treatment of the already privileged class or group in the distribution of educational provision in Nigeria. According to him, those who control the machinery of the state and its institutions are counted among the most privileged in Nigeria. These government functionaries oftentimes use their positions to ensure that any policies aimed at radically redistributing educational provisions, provided such policies do not feather their nests, never see the light of the day. The top government functionaries sometimes use their positions to locate educational institutions to places influenced by political expediency rather than need.

Can there be an equal educational opportunity in Nigeria?

A better way of looking at this question is; “can the problem of educational inequality be remedied?” some optimist may respond in the affirmative and make suggestions as to how to remedy the situation, while the pessimists may object to any solutions to it. For the proponents of equal educational opportunity, the adequate provision of textbooks, equipments, qualified manpower, and other essential infrastructural facilities in our schools would narrow the perceived educational gap. The proponents of this view hold that “facilitation of entry, exposure to the same curriculum, in the same types of school, the same type of teachers, in the same environment would result in equal achievement in individual development of abilities, equal access to socio-economic and political opportunities (Akimpelu in Nwafor, 2010) [14]. The idea here borders on free-schooling. This assumption may not be holistically correct because the view

of Coleman in Nwafor (2010) [14] that free school, however do not Mean that cost of a Child’s education become reduced to zero for Families at all economic levels.

This implies that it is not possible for every child to attend the same type of school even within the same type of environment. Similarly, the cost of education cannot be equally free, and even if it were to be free, it would be to some extent. According to Akimpelu in Nwafor (2015), the idea of equal educational opportunity cannot be achieved, because the idea of a just and egalitarian society, the fulcrum of equal educational opportunity, cannot materialize.

Conclusion

In keeping with its statutory duty of providing equal and adequate educational opportunities for all, the federal government of Nigeria introduced the quota system of admission as a policy that will help to neutralize such hindrances that prevent many school applicants from certain areas of the country to have comparable access to education as their counterparts. However, the quota system of admission through its operations is considered as a setback as well as a serious problem to promoting equal access to education in Nigeria. This position is informed by the fact that quota system of admission through its discriminatory admission process constitutes a serious hindrance to many school applicants of particular state of origin and in the process creates more gap in educational access than it was meant to tackle. This paper therefore concludes that quota system of admission as implemented in Nigeria educational sector circuitously works against equal access as it has been made to function as a sword against some and a shield for some and can therefore not be regarded as a competent measure of facilitating equal access to education across board due to the negative implications it holds for some school applicants.

Suggestions

At the end of the discourse, these suggestions are put forward:

1. Legislation or policy formulation for facilitating equal access to education should be prioritized in Nigeria.
2. Quota system of admission should be withdrawn from Nigeria educational system as it holds negative implications for equal access to education.
3. Any policy directed at facilitating equal access to education must be made to function as a sword to deal with hindrances posed by an individuals' socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender or religious inclinations and a shield to protect others from any negative and unintended implications.

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