



Access, Equity and Quality in Higher Education

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ACCESS, EQUITY AND QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ISBN 978-36442-9-5

NAEP Publication

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Providing an Enabling Framework for Increasing Access to Higher Education in Nigeria: The Evolving Role of Government

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Abstract

The ability of a society to produce, select, adapt and utilize knowledge is critical for sustained economic welfare. Hence knowledge gained through the formal education sector has become the most important factor for social and economic development. The Nigerian tertiary education is therefore important if the country is to witness an increase in overall literacy level and general economic development. Except this level of education is solid enough to meet the challenges of producing the needed manpower for the economy, the dream of achieving economic freedom may be difficult. Unfortunately, however, a look at the tertiary education development in Nigeria, particularly at the university level, reveals that the country still lags behind in providing the needed access to its teeming applicants seeking places in its tertiary institutions. In the realization of the important role played by the tertiary institutions and government's limitations providing for the applicants solely, this paper suggests relevant government policies reform that will enhance greater access to higher education in Nigeria. These policies include, among others, the creation of an enabling environment that will stimulate and encourage expansion in the system.

Introduction

There is no prescription for how a country creates such culture of knowledge. But government does have a role – a role in education, in encouraging the kind of creativity and risk taking that the scientific entrepreneurship requires, in creating the institutions that facilitate ideas being brought into fruition, and a regulatory and tax environment that rewards this kind of activity.” (Joseph E. Stiglitz, Noble Prize Lecture, 2001:12).

As a developing and transiting economy, Nigeria faces, the emerging challenge of supporting knowledge – driven development through promoting equity and access to higher institutions of learning. Given this awareness, the country is gradually shifting from the small elitist system (a situation where only very few people have access to higher education) toward an expanded tertiary education system. This is manifested in the number of higher institutions that are

available in the country at present. For instance, in 1948, there were 104 students in the only available university (University of Ibadan) in Nigeria. Specifically, Oyebade's (2004) report revealed that as at 2001/2002 academic year, a total of 95,199 candidates gained admission to the existing universities. Today, available statistics show that there are above 1 million candidates seeking to be admitted into the country's 53 universities (Ehiametalor, 2004). The World Bank 2005 study show that Nigeria gross enrolment rate into higher institution increased from 2.7 percent in 1980 to 3.5 percent in 1985 and 4.0 percent in 1995. This reflects a general desire by the country to improve its human resource base.

However, despite the seeming growth in tertiary education development, many eligible Nigerians have been consistently denied the opportunity of gaining access to higher institutions as against their expectation. In comparison with some countries in Africa and other economies within the OECD, Nigeria's gross enrolment rate at the tertiary level pales into insignificance. While the country's gross enrolment ratio was 4.0 percent in 1995, the GER for Egypt was 20.2 and 18.9 percent for South Africa. In the same vein, the gross enrolment for OECD countries like the United States and Australia, were 80.9 and 72.9 percent respectively (World Bank, 2003). There is a need for the government to initiate appropriate measures for expanding access, particularly at the university level where the demand has greatly outstripped the supply.

The Role of Tertiary Education in the Nigerian Economy Development

Education is a critical component of Human Resource Development. A high quality and market relevant education is capable of offering clear directions in most economic endeavours ranging from poverty eradication to population control (Umo, 1997).

In agreement with this view, Yesufu (2000) in Adamu (2003) submits that "the essence of human resource development (Education) becomes one of ensuring that the workforce is continuously adapted for, and upgraded to meet, the new challenge of its total environment. The importance of education as an instrument for economy development has been recognized by most countries of the world. This human capital formation is so important that Adedeji in the Khartoum declaration of 1988 cited by Adam (2003) states' that:

The human dimension is a sine-qua-non of economic recovery ... no SAP or any economic recovery programme should be formulated or can be implemented without having at its heart detailed social and human priorities. There can be no real structural adjustment or economic recovery in the absence of the human imperative. (Adedeji et al., 1990:390).

The ability of the country to produce, select, adapt and use knowledge generated from formal education is very critical for sustaining economic growth and improved standard of living. Hence, knowledge has become the most

important factor for economic development (World Bank, 2002:7). In a study by the Organization of Economic Cooperative and Development (OECD) on the determinants of growth, it was concluded that the underlying long-term growth rates in these OECD economies depend on the maintenance and expansion of their knowledge base via effective and efficient education (OECD, 1998b).

Nigeria's tertiary education must be given adequate attention if the country is to witness an overall increase in literacy level. Except the tertiary education level is solid enough to sustain the lower level of education in terms of provision of the needed manpower, the dream of accomplishing universal enrolment may even be jeopardized. According to the World Bank, there is a strong doubt that developing country (Nigeria included) could make significant progress toward achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals without a strong tertiary system (World Bank, 2002). The truth, therefore, is that there is no other route to economic advancement than just simply getting on with the human and physical development of a country up to an irreversible stage before bothering about the macro-economics of the country (Philip, 2003). The human capacity building is important for the country's development. The success of today's "Asian Tigers" has been traced to their successful educational development (World Bank, 1993:1).

The tertiary education institutions have a critical role in supporting knowledge-driven economic strategies and the construction of democratic and socially cohesive societies. It assists in the provision and improvement of competent, relevant and responsible professionals, which are needed for sound economic management. Its academic and research activities also help in providing the crucial support for national innovation system. The tertiary institution often constitutes the backbone of a country's information infrastructure. In fact, the norms, attitudes, values and ethics that the tertiary institutions impact on students are the foundation of the social capital necessary for constructing healthy civil societies and cohesive cultures – the very bedrock of good governance and a democratic political system (Harrison and Huntington, 2000).

The Nigerian nation stands to gain a lot from improving and expanding its tertiary institutions of learning through a comprehensive development. The knowledge provided by these higher institutions is capable of accelerating the nations overall social and economic development. This level of education certainly helps in the improvement of the individual recipient, it increases the income earnings of the individual, improves the occupational mobility, reduces the level of unemployment and helps to enhance income distribution and hence improve social equity (Adamu, 2003:57).

The Need to Expand Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Despite the seeming rapid growth in tertiary education, particularly at the university level, the enrolment gap between supply and demand for education at that level has not diminished. In fact, the demand for university places has continued to widen. Moreover, when compared with many other countries, Nigerian human resources development index is unsatisfactory (Obanya, 2002; Umo, 2003). Although population growth is more rapid in developing countries (World Bank, 1999), the transition rate from secondary level to tertiary level of education has been relatively low. Table I shows the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for different regions across the world.

Table I: Gross Enrolment Ratio in Tertiary Education in Selected Countries (1980 – 1995)

	1980	1985	1990	1995
Africa				
Nigeria	2.7	3.5	4.1	4.0
South Africa	-	-	13.2	18.9
Algeria	5.9	7.9	11.4	12.0
Europe				
United Kingdom	19.1	21.7	30.2	49.6
Norway	25.5	29.6	42.3	58.6
Bulgaria	16.2	18.9	31.1	39.4
North America				
United States	55.5	60.2	75.2	80.9
Canada	57.1	69.6	94.7	87.8
Mexico	14.3	15.9	14.5	15.2
Latin America				
Brazil	11.1	10.3	11.2	11.3
Argentina	21.8	35.7	38.1	36.2
Columbia	8.6	10.9	13.4	15.5
Asia				
India	5.2	6.0	6.1	6.6
China	1.7	2.9	3.0	5.3
Korea Rep.	14.7	34.0	38.6	52.0

Source: The World Bank (2002)

Table I shows that Nigeria's gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education is the lowest among the different regions of the world. With a population of 126 million people and 55 universities (Ehiamentalor, 2005), Nigeria's gross enrolment leaves very much to be desired when compared with India, one

billion population, (8,407 universities) and Argentina 38.7 million with 1,705 universities (Ehiametalor, 2005). Virtually all the countries in the different regions as shown in the table have grown in tertiary education provision for their citizens by moving steadily up the ladder.

Table II: University Education Demand and Supply in Nigeria (1960 – 2004)

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Universities</i>	<i>No. of Applicant</i>	<i>Admitted</i>	<i>Not Admitted</i>
1960/61	2	2,461	946	62.00
1965/66	5	6,198	3,170	49.00
1970/71	6	6,739	5,223	22.00
1975/76	13	114,801	14,417	87.00
1980/81		145,567	24,191	83.2
1985/86	27	212,114	35,163	83.00
1990/91	31	287,572	48,504	83.1
1995/96		512,797	37,498	92.7
1996/97		376,827	56,055	85.1
1997/98	37	419,807	72,791	82.7
1998/99		321,268	78,550	75.6
1999/00		418,928	78,550	81.2
2000/01	47	467,490	50,277	89.3
2001/02		842,072	95,199	88.7
2002/03		1,039,183	NA	NA
2003/04	53	838,051	NA	NA

Source: Babalola (1994) and Oyebade (2005)

Table II shows that although the number of JAMB candidates admitted increased on the average over the years, the number admitted in relation to those not admitted is rather on the decline. For instance, the total number of candidates not admitted increased from 83 percent in 1985/86 session to 83.1 percent in 1990/91 session and subsequently increased to 92.7 percent during the 1995/96 academic session. Ironically, however, while the numbers of applicants' were on the increase during those periods, the actual numbers that were admitted relatively declined. This was despite the increase in the number of universities from 27 to 31 during the period.

Government's Enabling Role in Expanding Access to Higher Education in Nigeria

In order to successfully perform their educational research and instructional functions in this 21st century, and compete effectively with the dynamics of

globalization, Nigerian tertiary educational institutions need to be able to respond effectively to the changing needs. They also need to adapt to a rapidly shifting tertiary education landscape and adopt a more flexible mode of organization and operation.

However, the responsibility of the government in meeting these challenges facing the tertiary level of education in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Government's intervention therefore becomes imperative in helping to provide the necessary framework needed for expanding access to accommodate the ever-increasing enrolment demand. The rationale for government's action in terms of policy and reforms can be seen in the statement of the economist, Paul Krugman, when he states thus:

Public goods, quasi public goods, and externalities are fairly common in the real world. They are common enough that it is necessary to take proposals for government intervention in the economy on a case-by-case basis. Government action can never be ruled in or ruled out on principle. Only with attention to detail and prudent judgement based on the fact of the case can we hope to approach an optimal allocation of resources. This means the government will always have a full agenda for reform – and in some cases, as in deregulation, that will mean undoing the actions of government in an earlier generation. This is not evidence of failure but of an alert, active government, aware of changing circumstances (Paul Krugman, 1996:13-15).

The changing circumstances and present situation is that the traditionally predominant role of government in the financing and provision of tertiary education is no longer consistent with the prevailing economic realities. The pressure in enrolment demand at the tertiary level, particularly at the university level (see Table I), has often outstripped government ability to provide high quality education to its citizens.

Given the adverse fiscal and budgetary constraints facing government's capacity to sustain the direct provision and financing of tertiary education, as well as the rise in market forces, the scope and modalities should change drastically. Rather than relying on government control model to impose reforms, government can bring about a positive change by encouraging both private and public institutions in a highly flexible manner. All necessary policies and reforms must be put in place to ensure an expanded enrolment at the tertiary level. In recognition of the need to widen access, the World Bank (1999) resonates that without vigorous efforts, global and national gaps in education opportunities and outcome could widen much more. As a response to this warning, it is necessary for the government to ensure the provision of an enabling environment that will stimulate higher education growth and expansion in the country. This could be achieved through the following approaches:

Exploring Economies of Scale and Broader Curriculum Programme

This implies the formulation of a clear vision for a long-term development of comprehensive, diversified and well-articulated tertiary institutions. Specifically, it includes among others, putting in place tertiary institutions that will be more effective in expanding access to the numerous seekers of higher education in the country. According to the World Bank (2002), a major reason for the low level of access into higher education in most developing countries is the lack of institutional differentiation to accommodate the diverse and growing enrolment. The design of tertiary institutions in Nigeria needs to reflect a comprehensive approach, which should integrate all the elements of diversified tertiary education in terms of broader curriculum. This could be achieved through exploring economies of scale approach as a means of gaining quantitative expansion. The ES approach emphasizes optimal size decision that will result in the appropriate strategy for raising enrolment in the face of limited financial resources. Findings have shown that quantitative expansion and financial savings through reduction in unit cost can be gained from exploring the economies of scale approach (Cummings, 1971; Bottomley, 1972; Byrnes and Dollery, 2002). These financial gains can then be ploughed back into the system to increase the number of places, if need be (Babalola, 1994).

Create an Appropriate Regulatory Environment

The government should create an enabling environment that will encourage initiatives and innovations from both public and private institutions to expand access to higher education. This could be achieved by relaxing stringent rules that could stifle the establishment of new institutions of higher learning in as much as these new institutions do not compromise quality. Cumbersome administrative requirements that constitute entry barrier to private universities and other higher education provisions should be removed. Massive involvement in the private provision of higher education can help expand access.

Allowing the Creation of Private Accrediting Bodies Accredited by NUC or other National Agencies:

This will help to spread the task of accrediting and lessen the time taken to accredit. It will help to accelerate the supply of higher education by prospective investors. The Columbian government has practised this form of policy, which has helped to expand access to higher education by as much as 40 percent (World Bank, 2003).

(4) *Forming Partnership and Cooperative with the Private Sector (both for Profit and Non-profit Institutions) and Civil Society:*

This could be achieved by using the comparative advantage principle to react common education goals more effectively and efficiently.

- (5) *Create a Level Playing Field between Public and Private Providers of Higher Education:* This could be done by ensuring that students in private institutions can have access to publicly funded facilities students loans programmes could do this. The United State is a good example of this form of policy (World Bank, 2003).
- (6) *Create a Link between Tertiary Education and Industries, i.e. Employers of Labour and the Society:* This could be achieved by encouraging institutions to be more responsive to the needs of the industries and the society. This will in turn encourage the industries and the society to provide and mobilize additional resources either through cost sharing or other direct financial support to institutions.
- (7) *Granting of Tax Holidays to Multinational Organizations willing to Invest in the Provision of Higher Education:* The government could create other incentives and facilitate diverse providers of higher education programme by providing all needed support that will encourage big business organizations to invest in tertiary education. Government however, needs to ensure that appropriate and marketrelevant education is the type that is provided.

Conclusion

Access to higher education, particularly university education, has faltered or declined in most sub-Saharan African nations with Nigeria being the worst hit. Although there seems to be slight increase in the gross enrolment over the past few years, this increase has not kept pace with population growth and the growing demand for higher education. The consequence is that in the face of inadequate supply of higher education places, inequality will be preserved as most poor people may be disproportionately excluded.

A situation where a single university in Nigeria is meant to serve 2,290,905 persons as against 50,365 persons in the United States (Ehiometalor, 2005), is no longer tenable in today's knowledge based global market. The government must, therefore, provide the needed political and economic environment that will help in expanding access to higher education in the country irrespective of socio-economic backgrounds and sex differences.

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