




## Overlooked or overemphasized? An evaluation of admission criteria and access to higher education in Nigeria

Segun Michael Ojetunde <sup>1\*</sup> , Ikmat Olanrewaju Junaid <sup>2</sup> , Lydia Titilayo Dada <sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, SOUTH AFRICA

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State, NIGERIA

<sup>3</sup>Department of Nursing, Lead City University, Ibadan, Oyo State, NIGERIA

\*Corresponding Author: [sojetunde@gmail.com](mailto:sojetunde@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined the influence of admission criteria on access to higher education in Nigeria. This investigation was prompted by a recent surge in the number of candidates who were denied admission to universities. Data on admissions from various higher education institutions in Nigeria, spanning the years 2015 to 2022, were collected and analyzed, focusing on gender, region, and type of institution. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in the analysis. The findings revealed that many Nigerian universities overemphasized admission criteria due to high demand, a trend less pronounced in polytechnics and colleges of education. Moreover, disparities in access to higher education were noted based on gender, region, and institution type. The study recommended that stakeholders enhance the capabilities of colleges of education and polytechnics, and called on universities, particularly in southwestern Nigeria, to adopt a more equitable approach to their admission criteria.

**Keywords:** 4IR, unified tertiary matriculation examination, admission criteria, higher education, post-UTME

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### INTRODUCTION

The education system in Nigeria, regardless of existing policies, is organized into three fundamental levels. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004), the primary level aims to cultivate basic literacy, numeracy, and awareness of the immediate environment in learners, who will subsequently serve as the foundation for the secondary level. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) specifies that 60% of the output from primary schools is directed toward senior secondary schools, while 20% is allocated to technical colleges, 10% to vocational training centers, and 10% to apprenticeship schemes, all of which together constitute secondary education.

The objective of secondary education is to produce graduates who are well-informed, technically equipped, and morally prepared to become productive citizens (Babalola & Jaiyeoba, 2008; Opesemowo et al., 2025). However, the outputs of secondary education that funnel into colleges of education, universities, polytechnics, and other degree-awarding institutions in Nigeria are disproportionately distributed. Tertiary education is categorized based on manpower needs and their distribution: universities are intended to develop high-level manpower, polytechnics focus on middle-level manpower, and colleges aim to cultivate low-level manpower (Babalola & Jaiyeoba, 2008).

Over time, the transition from secondary to tertiary education has become increasingly challenging for candidates, especially those aiming to enter universities. This difficulty may arise from the considerable benefits, exposure, and economic opportunities linked to university education (Ubogu, 2011). Although the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) states that access refers to the opportunity for entitled individuals to receive education, the reality in Nigeria indicates that access to university education is quite limited. Numerous factors—referred to as access and equity factors—beyond the mere availability of facilities and the number of universities present significant obstacles for the many candidates seeking admission. While previous studies have explored access, few have thoroughly analyzed admission criteria and regional or gender disparities using recent longitudinal data, as reported in this study.

#### Access to Nigerian Higher Institutions

Although research shows that higher education enrollment in sub-Saharan Africa has a significant but negative effect on employment, with unemployment having a negative and significant effect on higher education enrollment (Amin & Ntembe, 2020), the situation is different in Nigeria. In Nigeria, there is an increasing demand for higher education. In response to the growing demand for higher education in Nigeria without a corresponding increase in access, various initiatives have been implemented by the Nigerian government. A key initiative is

**Table 1.** Number of universities in Nigeria based on ownership (National University Commission, 2024)

Year	Federal university	State university	Private university
2024	62	63	149
2019	43	49	78
2009	27	33	40
1999	25	13	3
Recent total	274		

the public-private partnership model introduced in 1999, which enables private individuals to obtain licenses to own and operate higher education institutions. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in the establishment of both public and privately owned universities. According to the National University Commission (2024), in 1999, there were 25 federal universities, 13 state universities, and 3 private universities. By 2023, these numbers had risen to 51 federal universities, 61 state universities, and 147 private universities. In 2022, the total number of candidates who applied for admission into universities and degree-awarding institutions, including polytechnics and colleges of education, was 1,639,879, 87,882, and 24,069, respectively (Joint Admission Matriculation Board, 2023). By 2024, the ownership ratios had increased to 62 federal, 63 state, and 149 private universities, bringing the total number of universities in Nigeria to 274 as of the last quarter of 2024, as illustrated in **Table 1**.

According to the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (2023), there has been a notable increase in the number of public and private colleges of education, rising from 125 in 2015 to 163 in 2022. Similarly, the number of polytechnics and diploma-awarding institutions grew from 251 in 2015 to 347 in 2022 (Joint Admission Matriculation Board, 2023) as part of efforts to improve candidates' access to higher education. However, despite the increase in institutions, access rates remain low.

Another significant initiative by the Nigerian government aimed at widening access to higher education, utilizing emerging teaching and learning technologies, was the establishment of an open university in 2002. This initiative resulted in the creation of an open university in each state of Nigeria, including the Federal Capital Territory, all managed by the National Open University. Despite these efforts to expand access, a substantial number of candidates still face barriers to admission into higher institutions in Nigeria. This situation indicates that factors beyond the mere availability of educational institutions contribute to the challenges encountered by aspiring students. One critical factor under investigation in this study is the admission criteria, which may significantly impact access.

### Access Factors to Higher Institutions in Nigeria

Tertiary institutions in Nigeria—whether colleges, polytechnics, or universities—are regulated by governing bodies that dictate their operational modalities. For example, universities are overseen by the National University Commission (2024), which establishes policies regarding admissions and curricula. A key aspect of these policies is the determination of the maximum number of students each university can admit annually, based on admission benchmarks set by the National University Commission (2024) as outlined by the Federal Ministry of Education (2009).

Current admission policies also include the quota system and catchment area guidelines established by the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (2023). These dictate that 60% of candidates

should be admitted based on merit, 20% for catchment areas, and 20% for educational disadvantage states (Omojola, 2023). This policy has raised concerns about equitable access for many candidates who qualify based solely on merit. Additionally, universities implement their own criteria, such as carrying capacity and additional fees, which can further limit access for candidates who might otherwise qualify if only merit were considered. The application of these policies appears to have created significant bottlenecks in the admission process, as access indicators suggest they have been extensively utilized by various institutions (Omojola, 2023).

A significant development in the admission process for higher institutions in Nigeria was the introduction of the unified tertiary matriculation examination (UTME) in 2009. This exam was designed for candidates seeking admission into various categories of higher education. Prior to the UTME, candidates aspiring to attend colleges of education and polytechnics took the polytechnics and college examination (PCE), while those aiming for universities and other degree-awarding institutions took the university matriculation examination (UME) conducted by Joint Admission Matriculation Board (2023).

Merging of the PCE and UME into the UTME has likely had substantial implications for access to higher education, as it combines candidates with varying academic abilities—those with lower academic performance from the PCE and those with higher proficiency from the UME. This consolidation may have inadvertently created advantages or disadvantages among candidates, further complicating the admission landscape. It gives the impression that all candidates, regardless of their academic ability, are potential university students, thereby indiscriminately widening the pool for university education.

Another significant barrier to candidates' access to tertiary education in Nigeria is the issue of equity, particularly regarding gender. A study by Ajala (2017) found that while there has been a notable reduction in gender disparity at the primary and secondary education levels, challenges persist at the tertiary level. Adeyemi and Akpotu (2004) indicated that the North-Central, North-West, and North-East regions of Nigeria exhibit the lowest enrollment rates for both females and males. Furthermore, Okolo (2002) reported that male enrollment in various universities continues to exceed that of female candidates.

This situation contradicts the principles of equity and inclusive education, which aim to address educational underachievement and enhance social opportunities for vulnerable student identities, including Indigenous and First Nations children, girls, children displaced by conflict or natural disasters, and those from minority ethnic, religious, or tribal groups, as well as children living in poverty, traveler children, and children with disabilities (Slee, 2018). Despite these ongoing disparities, there is a lack of recent data on gender inequality in access to tertiary education in Nigeria. Therefore, this study aims to provide updated insights into gender differences in enrollment in tertiary institutions.

### Test Administration for Higher Institution Candidates and 4IR Education Technology

The adoption of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) education technology marks a significant innovation in the examination process for candidates, particularly by Joint Admission Matriculation Board (2023). Historically, during the First Industrial Revolution, educational technology primarily focused on producing low-cost instructional materials, which had minimal impact on educational assessment, as the

assessment formats remained paper-based and monitored by examiners. The Second Industrial Revolution introduced advancements that enabled the recording of the teaching and learning process, allowing lessons to be replayed in the future (Ojetunde & Oluwatoyin, 2021). This period also saw the introduction of cameras to help curb examination malpractices, enhancing monitoring and reducing unfair advantages among candidates.

The Third Industrial Revolution further advanced educational technology by converting learning materials into digital formats, allowing stakeholders—students, teachers, and examiners—to manipulate them more freely. This era marked the digitalization of classroom activities and a shift from traditional paper-and-pencil assessments to computer-based testing (CBT) (Isah & Ojetunde, 2019). During this time, assessments relied on programmed test instruments delivered via computer systems or networks. The emergence of the 4IR has introduced cutting-edge educational technologies, including artificial intelligence, robotics, and online platforms, into the teaching, learning, and assessment processes. A defining feature of this era is the transition of classroom activities to online environments (Ojetunde & Ramnarian, 2023). Consequently, the assessment process has also moved online, making online testing a prevalent term among examiners.

The adoption of online testing by the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) for the UTME in 2013 marked a remarkable advancement in the history of test administration in Nigeria. A trial test of online testing for UTME began in the same year, with tertiary institutions using its results to admit students in subsequent years. Studies have shown that online testing is flexible from the students' perspective (Bailey & Card, 2009; Sun et al., 2008) and minimizes testing time, especially when class schedules and testing periods clash. Additionally, online testing has been reported to save time on marking, depending on how the test items are structured, and it encourages students' autonomous learning—a key factor for success in higher education (Muranaka-Vulech, 2021).

However, the reality is that over 70% of Nigeria's land space remains rural (Bello, 2015). The implications of location in determining the education process and outcomes largely stem from qualitative and quantitative disparities in human and material resources between rural and urban settings. These locational differences affect the availability of Internet connectivity, leaving many candidates disadvantaged during the test administration process. Another significant challenge is the varying levels of technical know-how or computer self-efficacy among candidates, which can lead to test anxiety.

Additionally, while numerous studies have focused on factors influencing candidates' access to higher education in Nigeria—particularly regarding infrastructure and funding—there remains a notable lack of research investigating inter-educational level system analysis. This gap underscores the need to assess the inefficiencies and bottlenecks in students' transitions from one educational level to another. Addressing this issue is a primary impetus for this study, which aims to provide insights into the systemic challenges affecting access to higher education in Nigeria.

### Research Questions

The pertinent research questions that guided the analysis conducted in this study are:

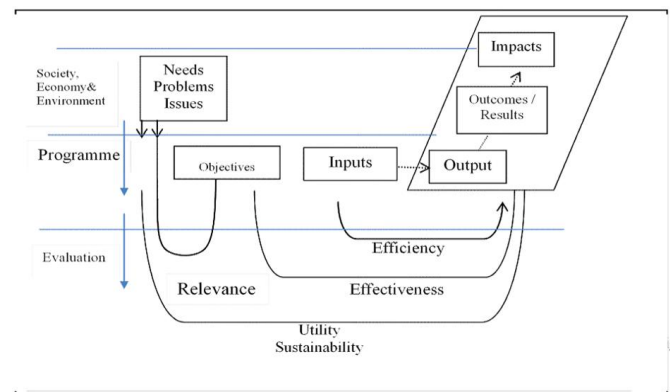


Figure 1. Evaluation approach for the study (Ojetunde, 2019a)

1. What is the trend in access (in terms of candidates who apply and those granted admission) to different categories of higher institutions in Nigeria during the years under review?
2. What is the trend in gender differences in access to higher institutions in Nigeria during the years under review?
3. What is the pattern of access to Nigerian higher institutions on a regional basis during the years under review?

## METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the process used to arrive at the findings of the study. The procedure includes the research design, evaluation framework, sampling technique, and analytical methods. The design adopted for the study is an ex-post facto, documentary analysis approach. This involved developing an inventory to collect documented data from Joint Admission Matriculation Board (2023) for the years 2015 to 2022. The recorded data on student admissions during the review period was analyzed to derive the findings reported in the study.

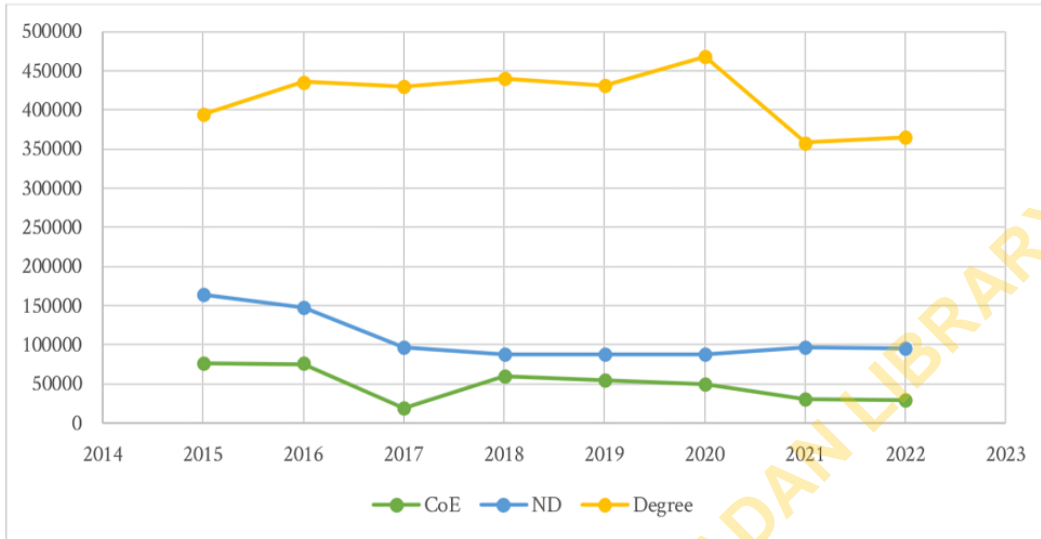
### Evaluation Approach

The evaluation approach adopted for this study is efficiency analysis. This choice is based on the premise that both secondary and tertiary education are evaluable programs characterized by systematically planned educational activities. These programs utilize managed resources to achieve specified educational goals, addressing the needs of specific, identified learners or groups at particular educational levels. This process leads to measurable behavioral changes or academic performance, following a predetermined plan of action or curriculum, along with specific investigative costs and benefits (Ojetunde, 2019a). According to Ojetunde (2019a), the fundamental purposes of evaluation include assessing relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability, as illustrated in Figure 1.

This study analyzed the efficiency of the transition from secondary education outputs to tertiary education inputs. It investigated how various admission factors—such as the quota system, carrying capacity, and educational disadvantages—alongside equity factors like gender, affect the efficient transition from secondary schools to higher institutions. The efficiency analysis employed access and equity criteria, including gender, region, and types of higher institutions.

**Table 2.** Yearly subscription and access to higher education institutions in Nigeria

Year	College of education		Polytechnics & ND awarding institutions		Universities & degree awarding institutions	
	Applicants	Access	Applicants	Access	Applicants	Access
2016	18,722	30,384 (162.3%)	76,228	163,692 (214.7%)	1,426,494	393,908 (27.6%)
2017	18,155	27,330 (150.5%)	75,219	147,083 (195.5%)	1,545,746	435,591 (28.2%)
2018	76,821	37,859 (49.3%)	18,364	96,267 (524.2%)	1,662,202	429,098 (25.8%)
2019	24,525	69,847 (284.8%)	59,643	87,495 (146.7%)	1,539,995	439,138 (28.5%)
2020	34,138	44,033 (129.0%)	54,900	87,327 (159.1%)	1,803,383	430,173 (23.9%)
2021	80,355	243,680 (129.0%)	49,737	87,554 (176.0%)	1,625,605	468,164 (28.8%)
2022	15,747	49,809 (316.3%)	30,614	96,024 (313.7%)	1,285,605	357,864 (27.8%)



**Figure 2.** Proportion of subscription and access to colleges of education (JAMB, 2022)

**Sampling Procedure and Sample**

Due to the use of national data, some aspects were disaggregated to reflect regional differences. For instance, to capture the disparity in access based on geopolitical zones in Nigeria, data from 50% of the geopolitical zones (3 out of 6) were utilized. From the selected geopolitical zones, a state and one federal university were randomly chosen to investigate admission disparities at both the state and geopolitical zone levels. National data without disaggregation was used to illustrate the access patterns over the years and the gender disparity in admissions across tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

**Method of Data Analysis**

Due to the high volume of data collected and the need to facilitate understanding of the results, descriptive statistics were extensively used for the analysis. Frequency counts, percentages, and bar charts were employed to analyze research question one. Research question two was analyzed using a repeated measures paired t-test, while research question three was analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. Inferences from the statistical test results were made at a 95% confidence level.

**RESULTS**

The results of the analysis were presented based on the research questions raised in the study.

**Research question 1.** What is the trend in access (in terms of candidates who apply and those granted admission) to different

categories of higher institutions in Nigeria during the years under review?

This research question was addressed through various methods, including calculating percentage access by dividing the number of applicants by the number of students admitted, as shown in **Table 2**. Additionally, **Figure 1** provides a graphical representation of the trend in access across the three categories of institutions.

**Table 2** presents the yearly subscription and access to tertiary institutions during the review period. The results indicate that access to colleges of education and polytechnics exceeds 100% for the majority of the years analyzed. In contrast, access to universities and other degree-awarding institutions remains consistently below 30% throughout the years. This highlights that the proportion of access, in percentage terms, for colleges of education and polytechnics is significantly higher than that for universities and other degree-awarding institutions.

The results in **Figure 1** demonstrate that while the percentage of candidates accessing polytechnics and colleges of education is higher than that for degree-awarding institutions, the actual number of candidates gaining access to universities and other degree-awarding institutions exceeds that of both polytechnics and colleges. Additionally, access to polytechnics is greater than that to colleges of education, while universities receive more access than polytechnics. This indicates that candidates tend to subscribe more to high-manpower training institutions but ultimately gain access to lower-manpower training institutions.

The results in **Figure 2** clearly illustrate the proportion of subscriptions and access to colleges of education in Nigeria. It shows

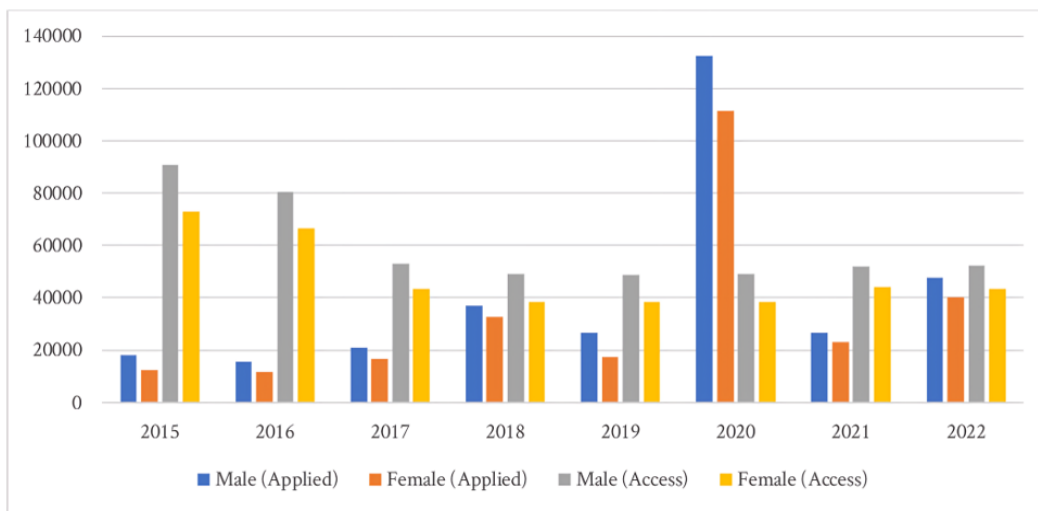


Figure 3. Proportion of students' subscriptions and access to ND awarding institutions (JAMB, 2022)

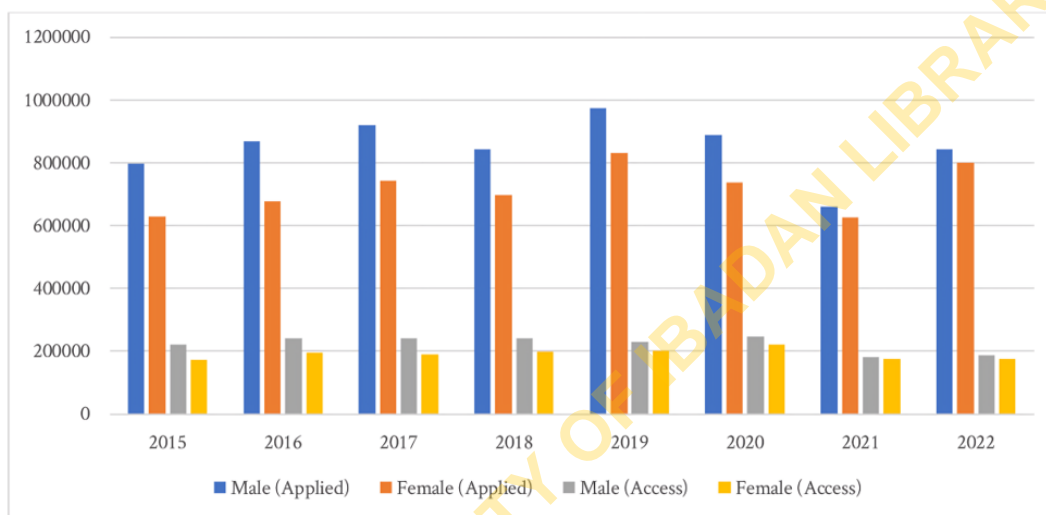


Figure 4. Proportion of students' subscription and access to degree awarding institutions (JAMB, 2022)

that the number of candidates who gained access is consistently higher than the number of candidates who applied. Additionally, in most years, the number of female candidates gaining access surpasses that of male candidates, except in 2015, 2016, and 2018. This current trend indicates that the number of female candidates admitted to colleges of education is now higher than that of their male counterparts.

Figure 3 illustrates the trend in the number of candidates who subscribed to and gained access to polytechnics and other degree-awarding institutions in Nigeria over the years reviewed. It is evident that the number of candidates accessing polytechnics and other national diploma (ND) awarding institutions surpasses the number who subscribed through Joint Admission Matriculation Board (2023), except in the year 2020. Furthermore, the data indicates that the number of male candidates gaining access to polytechnics is higher than that of their female counterparts.

Figure 4 illustrates the trend in subscription and access to universities and other degree-awarding institutions. It is evident that the proportion of candidates who gain access to these institutions is significantly lower than the number of candidates who subscribed. This indicates a substantial gap between those who apply and those who are

admitted. Also, access to universities remained consistently below 30% while colleges/polytechnics exceeded 100%.

The results further indicate that the proportion of male candidates who gained access to universities and other degree-awarding institutions exceeds that of female candidates. Consequently, it can be concluded that the female acceptance rate at universities in Nigeria is low overall, and the admission process tends to favor males more than females.

**Research question 2.** What is the trend in gender differences in access to higher institutions in Nigeria during the years under review?

The results in Table 3 indicate that the mean number of male candidates accessing university education is consistently greater than that of female candidates across all categories of higher institutions. The data reveals that while the access rates for male candidates to colleges of education in Nigeria are not significantly higher than those for females during the years reviewed, the mean access for males to polytechnics and other degree-awarding institutions is significantly higher than for their female counterparts. Additionally, the mean access of male candidates to universities in Nigeria is occasionally and significantly higher than that of female candidates, highlighting a persistent gender disparity in access to higher education institutions.

**Table 3.** Trend in gender difference in access to colleges of education, polytechnics, universities in Nigeria

Institution	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Colleges	M = 332, F = 277, df = 124, t = 1.74, Sig. = NS	M = 312, F = 283, df = 125, t = 0.92, Sig. = NS	M = 60, F = 84, df = 125, t = 1.75, Sig. = NS	M = 251, F = 245, df = 119, t = 0.19, Sig. = NS	M = 203, F = 132, df = 131, t = -0.39, Sig. = NS	M = 165, F = 182, df = 142, t = -1.1, Sig. = NS	M = 106, F = 133, df = 127, t = -2.5, Sig. = S	M = 85, F = 91, df = 162, t = -0.75, Sig. = NS
Diploma awarding institutions	M = 361, F = 290, df = 250, t = 3.79, Sig. = S	M = 311, F = 258, df = 257, t = 3.44, Sig. = S	M = 194, F = 159, df = 271, t = 3.98, Sig. = S	M = 179, F = 139, df = 273, t = 4.060, Sig. = S	M = 154, F = 121, df = 315, t = 3.98, Sig. = S	M = 157, F = 123, df = 312, t = 4.32, Sig. = S	M = 162, F = 138, df = 320, t = 3.38, Sig. = S	M = 151, F = 125, df = 346, t = 3.83, Sig. = S
Universities	M = 1,029, F = 811, df = 213, t = 4.6, Sig. = S	M = 1,137, F = 926, df = 210, t = 3.98, Sig. = S	M = 959, F = 750, df = 250, t = 4.973, Sig. = SN	M = 913, F = 750, df = 263, t = 3.96, Sig. = S	M = 830, F = 734, df = 299, t = 2.85, Sig. = S	M = 825, F = 734, df = 299, t = 2.82, Sig. = S	M = 573, F = 560, df = 315, t = 0.517, Sig. = NS	M = 576, F = 540, df = 326, t = 1.61, Sig. = NS

**Table 4.** Admission statistics and access to public universities in the South-West, Nigeria

State	Institution	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Ekiti	FUOYE	6,872 (1,490) 21.7%	7,911 (3,111) 39.3%	22,459 (5,473) 24.4%	37,009 (6,973) 18.8%	42,870 (7,437) 17.3%	38,938 (8,114) 20.8%	45,920 (7,852) 17.1%	53,367 (4,528) 8.48%
	EKSU	13,805 (6,578) 47.6%	15,236 (6,114) 40.1%	13,572 (6,892) 50.8%	12,469 (7,630) 61.2%	13,221 (7,843) 59.3%	15,731 (8,095) 51.5%	10,380 (4,373) 43.1%	9,776 (6,797) 69.5%
Lagos	UNILAG	53,398 (8,532) 16.0%	53,792 (8,580) 16.0%	70,674 (9,152) 13.0%	61,683 (8,804) 14.3%	74,725 (9,424) 12.6%	47,269 (8,040) 17.0%	59,190 (3,438) 5.81%	75,967 (5,847) 7.7%
	LASU	13,578 (5,075) 37.3%	14,825 (6,404) 43.2%	39,429 (4,543) 11.5%	33,754 (5,057) 15.0%	35,080 (7,772) 22.2%	31,643 (6,941) 22.0%	33,746 (6,939) 20.6%	42,776 (9,192) 21.4%
Ondo	FUTA	14,589 (3,622) 24.8%	25,525 (5,113) 20.0%	22,295 (3,889) 17.4%	20,723 (3,609) 17.4%	22,854 (3,286) 14.4%	16,575 (3,399) 20.5%	20,045 (1,572) 7.8%	20,705 (1,690) 12.1%
	AAU	25,430 (4,323) 17.0%	31,226 (5,057) 16.2%	28,909 (5,334) 18.5%	20,636 (5,283) 25.6%	10,439 (4,812) 46.1%	10,304 (5,681) 55.1%	6,060 (2,485) 41.0%	5,467 (4,348) 79.5%
Ogun	FUNAAB	*(3757)	23,520 (3,840) 16.3%	12,936 (3,789) 29.3%	11,919 (4,002) 33.6%	15,332 (4,187) 27.3%	11,061 (4,426) 40.0%	11,482 (1,451) 12.6%	12,943 (4,204) 17.6%
	OOU	14,258 (7,473) 52.4%	21,547 (8,917) 41.4%	20,690 (6,189) 29.9%	21,579 (6,420) 29.8%	22,876 (5,802) 25.4%	19,914 (5,794) 29.1%	21,330 (6,903) 32.4%	23,723 (7,323) 30.8%
Osun	OAU	35,868 (7,505) 20.9%	38,509 (7,568) 19.7%	46,237 (8,123) 17.6%	42,875 (6,624) 15.4%	56,900 (6,041) 19.6%	34,152 (4,960) 14.5%	42,614 (3,128) 7.3%	51,437 (3,531) 6.86%
	UNIOSUN	9,236 (3,064) 33.2%	8,470 (2,733) 32.3%	8,702 (3,209) 36.9%	5,168 (3,241) 62.7%	5,476 (3,411) 62.3%	7,504 (4,044) 53.9%	7,247 (3,799) 52.4%	8,345 (6,789) 81.35
Oyo	UI	40,169 (4,239) 10.8%	52,511 (3,817) 7.3%	54,396 (3,965) 7.3%	46,746 (4,277) 9.1%	63,393 (4,407) 7.0%	35,408 (4,260) 12.0%	888** (*****) 0.0%	44,476 (2,498) 5.62%
	LAUTECH	16,785 (5,506) 32.8%	16,358 (6,642) 40.6%	4,092 (1,885) 46.1%	3,407* (5,543) 163%	2,384* (8,094) 340%	12,239 (6,484) 53.0%	12,182 (6,962) 57.1%	18,575 (0,000) 0.0%
Overall: 32% Mean access in %		26.9%	27.7%	25.2%	38.8%	54.5%	32.5%	24.8%	28.5%

Note. Value in bracket = Number of admitted; Value out of bracket = Number of candidates applied for admission; \*Exceptional case; & \*\*No admission for that year

**Research question 3.** What is the pattern of access to Nigerian higher institutions on a regional basis during the years under review?

The results in **Table 4** detail the number of candidates who applied to public universities in the South-West region of Nigeria and the corresponding admission rates. In 2015, only one out of the 12 sampled universities admitted more than 50% of the total candidates, with a mean access rate of 26.9%. In 2016, the mean percentage of candidates admitted decreased slightly to 27%, indicating that 73% of applicants were not admitted. This downward trend continued in 2017, with the mean admission rate dropping to 25.2%, meaning approximately 75% of candidates were denied admission. However, in 2018, there was a

notable increase, with the mean access rising to 38.8%, suggesting that about 60% of candidates remained unadmitted. The following year saw a further rise in mean access to 54.5%, but in the subsequent years, the mean access fell below 35%. Overall, the average access to universities in the South-West region is 32%, implying that roughly 70% of all candidates who applied for admission were not considered. This underscores the low level of access to public universities in South-West Nigeria.

The results in **Table 5** indicate that in 2015, only one of the sampled universities admitted 50% or more of the candidates who applied, resulting in a mean access rate of 43.5%. In 2016, however, multiple

**Table 5.** Admission statistics and access to public universities in North-West, Nigeria

State	Institution	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Jigawa	SLUK	1,841 (875) 47.5%	1,469 (792) 53.9%	4,922 (940) 19.1%	4,909 (981) 20.0%	6,931 (953) 13.7%	7,717 (1142) 14.8%	2,984 (1,668) 55.9%	6,902 (1,669) 24.2%
	FUD	6,037 (1,437) 23.8%	9,812 (2,017) 20.6%	10,384 (2,085) 20.1%	13,470 (3,002) 22.3%	16,723 (3,375) 25.6%	18,624 (4,287) 23.0%	11,250 (1,479) 13.1%	14,817 (2,138) 14.4%
Kaduna	ABU	56,326 (12,028) 21.4%	73,710 (12,230) 16.6%	88,406 (10,425) 11.8%	74,550 (8,820) 11.8%	78,953 (4,422) 5.6%	60,866 (8,526) 14.0%	44,424 (2,413) 5.4%	42,761(****) -

**Table 5 (Continued).** Admission statistics and access to public universities in North-West, Nigeria

State	Institution	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Kano	KADSU	24,888 (3,438) 13.8%	29,270 (3,935) 13.44%	28,751 (4,154) 14.5%	24,461 (4,657) 19.04%	33,463 (4,983) 14.9%	31,907 (6,332) 19.9%	17,443 (3,797) 21.8%	13,222 (3,301) 25.0%
	BAU	45,034 (10,076) 22.4%	62,913 (9,910) 15.8%	66,771 (9,517) 14.3%	56,261 (8,985) 16.0%	72,469 (7,519) 10.4%	51,072 (5,393) 10.6%	44,352 (3,409) 7.7%	57,150 (4,248) 7.4%
	KANUST	4,192 (3,292) 78.5%	2,234* (5,866) 262.5%	5,204 (5,041) 96.8%	6,819 (4,772) 70.0%	5,605 (3,555) 63.4%	8,883 (1,649) 18.5%	4,968 (4842) 97.5%	6,215 (****)
Katsina	FUD	3,089 (926) 30.0%	3,780 (1,461) 38.7%	3,849 (3,481) 90.4%	9,295 (5,814) 62.5%	10,396 (4,965) 47.8%	12,390 (4,800) 38.7%	5,159 (3,734) 72.4%	7,702 (3,402) 44.2%
	UMYU	13,069 (2,839) 21.7%	14,829 (2,728) 18.4%	15,615 (2,324) 14.9%	12,078 (2,615) 21.7%	17,018 (1,945) 11.4%	13,431 (2,510) 18.7%	8,704 (2,049) 23.5%	13,101 (****)
Kebbi	FUB	3,148 (1,078) 34.2%	6,204 (1,542) 24.9%	7,516 (1,063) 14.1%	7,552 (1,093) 15.5%	9,974 (1,272) 12.8%	11,322 (2,229) 19.7%	6,184 (816) 13.2%	9,090 (2,079) 22.9%
	KEBUST	1,103* (1,693) 153.5%	1,523* (2,225) 146.1%	2,461 (1,063) 43.2%	4,003 (2,064) 51.6%	3,405 (1,546) 45.4%	4,298 (1,968) 45.8%	3,063 (1,624) 53.0%	3,847 (2,031) 52.8%
Sokoto	UDUS	20,465 (6,316) 30.9%	26,858 (8,513) 31.7%	3,379 (2,369) 70.1%	26,225 (5,656) 21.6%	31,574 (5,859) 18.6%	28,600 (5,528) 19.3%	16,904 (1,434) 8.5%	24,170 (2,743) 11.3%
	SOSUS	2,382 (1,066) 44.8%	2,260 (1,582) 70.0%	3,370 (2,369) 70.3%	5,235 (2,361) 45.1%	5,208 (2,052) 39.4%	6,718 (2,090) 31.1%	2,640 (1,789) 67.8%	4,558 (2,626) 57.6%
Overall: 35% Mean access in %		43.5%	59.4%	39.9%	31.4%	25.7%	22.8%	36.7%	21.7%

Note. Value in bracket = Number of admitted; Value out of bracket = Number of candidates applied for admission; \*Exceptional case; & \*\*No admission for that year

**Table 6.** Admission statistics and access to public universities in South-South, Nigeria

State	Institution	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Akwa Ibom	UNIUYO	3,989 (5,247) 13%	3,979 (6,659) 17%	40,361 (6,167) 15%	33,508 (6,133) 18%	40,574 (7,017) 17%	31,169 (8,827) 28%	26,218 (8,207) 31%	34,849 (****)
	AKSU	5,067 (2,235) 44%	3,903 (2,264) 58%	5,850 (2,210) 38%	7,868 (2,303) 29%	7,872 (2,362) 30%	8,245 (2,668) 32%	3,848 (1,502) 39%	3,370 (3,237) 96%
Bayelsa	FUO	3,104 (798) 26%	2,474 (2,651) 107%	7,445 (2,932) 39%	37,009 (6,973) 19%	8,577 (3,184) 37%	8,219 (2,987) 36%	3,936 (2,728) 69%	5,807 (3,074) 53%
	DELSU	33,223 (6,093) 18%	32,896 (5,651) 17%	32,132 (5,461) 17%	32,128 (4,526) 14%	32,060 (5,200) 16%	34,561 (6,678) 19%	29,272 (6,498) 22%	30,515 (5,708) 19%
Delta	FUP	4,899 (872) 18%	5,441 (1,023) 19%	4,769 (1,464) 31%	4,209 (1,464) 35%	4,505 (1,453) 32%	3,470 (1,377) 40%	3,181 (1,225) 39%	3,409 (1,252) 37%
	UNIBEN	57,131 (10,239) 18%	70,848 (11,078) 16%	77,428 (11,167) 14%	70,332 (12,400) 18%	78,747 (11,239) 27%	49,361 (12,398) 25%	49,763 (7,904) 16%	55,455 (10,520) 19%
Edo	AAU	32,210 (9,710) 30%	19,391 (8,969) 42%	13,370 (8,054) 60%	16,819 (7,315) 43%	14,252 (4,586) 32%	21,253 (278) 1%	12,563 (1620) 13%	9,753 (****)
	UNICAL	27,528 (8,221) 30%	30,263 (8,236) 27%	38,135 (9,365) 25%	31,956 (10,720) 34%	44,670 (11,976) 27%	44,603 (11,001) 25%	26,698 (9,295) 35%	29,328 (9,989) 34%
C. Rivers	CRUT	5,485 (3,781) 69%	2,786 (3,664) 132%	2,943 (5,543) 188%	3,524 (6,228) 177%	3,847 (5,689) 148%	8,195 (6,338) 77%	2,536 (3,814) 150%	4,383 (5,174) 118%
	UNIPORT	32,782 (9,157) 28%	37,853 (9,613) 25%	40,861 (8,125) 20%	36,505 (8,208) 22%	40,285 (8,755) 22%	29,913 (9,495) 32%	26,180 (8,313) 32%	31,738 (8,543) 27%
Rivers	RSUST	20,357 (4,721) 23%	21,669 (4,919) 132%	21,234 (5,412) 25%	20,963 (6,689) 32%	22,582 (7,580) 34%	20,963 (6,689) 32%	2,536 (3,814) 150%	20,963 (6,689) 32%
	Overall: 41% Mean access in %	29%	54%	43%	40%	37%	32%	54%	39%

Note. Value in bracket = Number of admitted; Value out of bracket = Number of candidates applied for admission; \*Exceptional case; \*\*No admission for that year; & No state university was computed for Bayelsa State

universities exceeded the 50% admission threshold, leading to a mean access rate of 59.4%. Further analysis shows that the mean access to universities in the North-West region for subsequent years has consistently remained below 40%. This suggests that since 2016, public universities in the North-West, Nigeria, have not admitted more than 40% of the candidates who applied. The overall mean access to public universities in this region is 35%, indicating that approximately 65% of the candidates who applied for admission in the North-West did not gain access.

The results presented in **Table 6** indicate that in 2015, only one university admitted more than 50% of candidates, with a mean

percentage access to universities at just 29%. In 2016, however, more than one university exceeded the 50% admission threshold, resulting in a mean access percentage of 54%. Subsequent years show that the mean percentage of access to universities in the South-South region of Nigeria fluctuated between 30% and 50%. Overall, the average access rate for candidates who applied for admission in this region is 41.3%, which means that over 58% of candidates were denied access to public universities.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The results of the study suggest that access rates to higher education in Nigeria vary by gender, with male candidates benefiting more across all categories of institutions. This trend may be attributed to the belief among many parents that educating male children is a priority, while the education of female children, particularly at higher levels, is often seen as less essential due to traditional views that women will eventually marry and join another family (Ojetunde, 2019b). Additionally, some female candidates may face challenges in meeting the academic rigor required for admission to higher institutions. These findings align with Ajala's (2017) report indicating gender disparity in admissions and support Okolo's (2002) observation of a gender imbalance favoring male candidates in university admissions in Nigeria.

The study also reveals that access rates vary by type of higher institution. This observation can be explained from two perspectives. First, the mean percentage of candidates gaining access to colleges and diploma-awarding institutions is higher compared to those accessing universities and other degree-awarding institutions. Conversely, the number of candidates admitted to universities and degree-awarding institutions exceeds that of those admitted to colleges, polytechnics, and other diploma-awarding institutions. This disparity indicates an over-subscription to university education, while admissions to colleges of education and polytechnics are under-subscribed. As a result, many candidates who are denied admission to universities eventually turn to colleges of education and polytechnics, thereby increasing the access rates in those institutions. These findings provide valuable, data-driven insights into why polytechnics and colleges of education in Nigeria experience higher access rates, while universities are over-subscribed, filling a gap in existing research on this phenomenon.

Another inference drawn from the study is that access to universities varies by geopolitical zone in Nigeria. The results indicate that the percentage of candidates accessing universities in the South-South region is higher than in the North-West and South-West regions. Additionally, access to public universities in the North-West surpasses that in the South-West. This trend may be attributed to growing initiatives in oil-producing states (primarily in the South-South) aimed at promoting higher education. Furthermore, northern states (North-West) are increasingly motivated to pursue education, following the example set by their South-West counterparts.

Another contributing factor could be the proliferation of private universities in the South-West, which encourages candidates to enroll in these institutions despite the associated costs, particularly due to the high access denial rates from public universities. However, these findings contradict Ojetunde's (2019b) report that parents from the South-East tend to prioritize business ventures, while those from the North place greater value on vocational training. In contrast, South-West parents emphasize education, which helps explain the higher school attendance in that region. Additionally, Okpukpara and Odurukwe (2006) noted regional disparities, stating that fewer children in the North-West and North-East attend school compared to those from the South-East, with more children in the South-West pursuing education than their counterparts in the South-East.

Overall, access to Nigerian universities is low, with access rates falling below 50% across all geopolitical zones. This limitation may be attributed to the increasing reliance on admission criteria such as quotas, catchment areas, carrying capacity, and high cut-off marks.

While these factors are less pronounced in the North, they are more significant in the South, particularly in the South-West. Another contributing factor is the use of 4IR education technologies for assessments, which tends to favor candidates who are tech-savvy. This places candidates with limited computer knowledge or those from rural areas—where connectivity and technical skills are major obstacles—at a disadvantage. This observation aligns with Bello's (2015) report highlighting that over 70% of Nigeria's population resides in rural areas, facing significant educational inequalities driven by socio-economic backgrounds and access to resources (Akinyemi & Ojetunde, 2020).

### Limitations of the Study

The study relies exclusively on data collected from Joint Admission Matriculation Board (2023) to assess access to higher education institutions in Nigeria. The researcher believes that a triangulation approach—collecting qualitative data from both candidates and administrators of higher education institutions, in addition to the secondary data used—would provide a more comprehensive understanding of access to higher education and the key issues surrounding it. Therefore, it is recommended that the future studies should combine quantitative and qualitative data. Furthermore, there may be limitations in accurately reporting the number of candidates who subscribed to or were admitted into higher education institutions in Nigeria, potentially due to unavoidable computation errors or omissions.

### Implications of the Study

The findings of the study highlight the need to strengthen polytechnics and colleges of education as integral components of higher education, enabling them to accommodate students who are not admitted to universities and other degree-awarding institutions. Additionally, the study suggests that cultural and regional influences on children's education are diminishing, particularly in northern and some southern regions of Nigeria, challenging the previous notion that parents in these areas resist Western (formal) education. Finally, the findings imply that there is a disproportionate focus on university education in Nigeria compared to other forms of higher education, as indicated by the subscription-access analysis of university admissions.

### Contributions to Knowledge

The study's findings offer comprehensive insights into access to higher education in Nigeria, examining equity from various perspectives, including gender, region, and institution, rather than relying solely on disaggregated data as seen in existing literature. It highlights notable disparities in access depending on the type of higher education. Furthermore, it reveals that candidates who are denied admission to universities and other degree-awarding institutions primarily seek entry into colleges of education, polytechnics, and other diploma-awarding institutions. Additionally, these findings can serve as a baseline for future researchers interested in trends in access to higher education in Nigeria. The study illustrates how prospective evaluators can perform efficient analyses within an education system, particularly when assessing differences in input and output. Moreover, the findings suggest that programs or systems lacking built-in evaluation from the outset are likely to experience efficiency losses or ineffectiveness, especially when certain factors prevent inputs from aligning with planned outputs.

## Lessons Learnt

The findings of the study offer several valuable lessons, highlighted as follows: Contrary to the general belief that youth from the Northern region of Nigeria are not inclined towards formal education despite having resources, the report indicates that there is appreciable access to higher education among northern youth. Historically, there has been a significant gender disparity in access to higher education favoring male candidates. However, the present findings suggest that this gender gap is gradually narrowing. Also, for most colleges of education, polytechnics, and degree-awarding institutions, the number of students admitted often exceeds the number of applicants in the same year. In contrast, this trend is reversed for universities in Nigeria, where the number of applicants typically surpasses the admissions. Nigerian universities tend to overemphasize admission criteria, whereas similar criteria are often overlooked by colleges of education, polytechnics, and other degree-awarding institutions.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that stakeholders in higher education in Nigeria moderate admissions across various institutions by providing candidates with proper orientation on the prospects and purposes of each type of institution. Additionally, the admission criteria for public universities should be re-evaluated to minimize the excessive screening of qualified candidates who may be disadvantaged by the quota system or catchment area policies. Furthermore, the government should enhance the capacity of colleges of education and polytechnics, either by converting some into degree-awarding institutions or by improving facilities to accommodate candidates who do not gain admission to universities. Moreover, suggestion could be made that the stakeholders adjusting quota allocations or piloting alternative admission models.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that gender, institutional, and regional differences in access to higher education in Nigeria stem from the differential application of admission criteria, such as quota systems, catchment areas, and cut-off marks. Additionally, the use of CBT serves as an immediate screening method in the admission process. The adoption of the UTME and CBT as part of 4IR education technologies provides a pathway for candidates who do not meet university admission criteria to pursue opportunities in polytechnics or colleges of education, contrasting with the previous era when the PCE and UME were in use. More so, to achieve SDG4 and equitable access, Nigeria must shift from overemphasizing university admission to building strong alternative tertiary education pathways.

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