

Quota system and University Admission in Nigeria: Equity Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Managing diversity has been a major preoccupation of the Nigeria state. The decision to embrace a federal system is part of a strategic response to national diversity. Nevertheless, agreeing on major mechanism for managing this has been a historical subject of contention (Afigbo, 1989; Ekeh, 1989; Gboyega, 1989; Gbirevbie & Ibieta, 2013; Mandaci & Tepeciklioglu, 2018). While there appear to be a general consensus on federal system, the nature, depth and character of federal principles has also been contentious (Afigbo, 1989; Osaghae, 1998). It is in this general context that quota system in university admission is located. Because of differential colonial experience across the different regions of the country and other sociological factors, most parts of northern Nigeria appeared less educated compared to the south. This was the situation in the immediate post-independent period and has remained so, even five decades after independence.

Although university education has a colonial origin in Nigeria, the quota policy was a post-colonial policy designed ostensibly in response to national diversity. Opinions are divided as regards quota system policies in Nigeria. The policies aimed at creating opportunities for disadvantaged states, has special considerations given to candidates from educationally disadvantaged states, largely in the north. Opinions are divided on the appropriateness, validity and scope of the policy. While some argued that it is important for managing national diversity, equity and national integration, others hold that the policies are encouraging discrimination and undermining merit in university admission. However, what constitute the problematic of this study is not the arguments for or against it, rather, it is about whether the policy has actually addressed the imbalance in university admission and the extent to which it is promoting or undermining equity in education.

Apart from occasional political outburst on this issue, only a few academic works have been done on this very important national policy (Omeje et.al. 2016; Odigwe & Swen, 2016; Joshua, 2014; Eberé & Ojowu, 2019). For instance, Omeje et al's work on quota system is limited to North Central Nigeria and the authors concluded that quota system has inequitable effect on students' admission processes; bastardizes admissions process, contributes to the production of low-quality graduates among others. Odigwe and Swen in their analysis on quota system and university admissions, zeroed in on universities in Cross River State. They surmised that admissions into universities should be based on merit so as not to promote mediocrity. The work of Joshua et al on quota system is limited to the unity secondary schools and no effort was made to find out whether quota system has reduced educational imbalance between the advantaged and disadvantaged states. Even these few have been predictably around the traditional 'for and against' perspective to the policies. There seems not to be significant studies considering the outcome of the quota policies, whether it has actually reduced educational imbalance between the educationally disadvantaged states vis-a-vis advantaged states and how the policy has promoted or weakened equity in university admission. Looking at the entire spectrum of education in Nigeria, has quota system policies helped the intended beneficiaries? Has the quota policy succeeded in narrowing education imbalance between the educationally developed and educationally less developed areas?

Admittedly, these are hard questions which have been glossed over or at best not given sufficient attention in the literature on quota system in Nigeria. These are parts of the questions this study intends to answer.

Objectives of the Study

One of the major reasons for the adoption of quota system is to ensure equity in access to higher education. It is based on this principle that the objectives of this study are defined. Thus, the specific objective of this research is to:

- i. examine the relationship between quota system and equity in university system.
- ii. determine whether or not the quota system has guaranteed educational balance in Nigeria.
- iii. determine other factors affecting university admission in Nigeria.
- iv. recommend ways of enhancing equity in Nigerian university education.

Scope of the Study

This study examines the quota policy from equity perspective. The study is therefore limited to the impact of quota system and catchment area policies on students' admissions in the selected federal universities in the six geo-political zones of the country. The choice of the federal universities is premised upon the assumption, that the policy is a federal policy in which all federal universities are expected to comply. This level of compliance may not be expected from state and private universities.

While the research was ambitiously designed to obtain and analyze admission data from 1980 to 2018, the study experienced a significant challenge of poor data and information management by the selected universities. None of the universities have systematically arranged or collated university admission data, even where they do, access was a challenge due to bureaucratic and related bottle-necks. These challenges made Time Series analysis one of the approaches to the study an impossible task, as the researchers had to rely on survey complemented by available data from JAMB, NUC and National Bureau of Statistics.

Concept of Equity in Education

The term equity has a long philosophical history. It is used to convey variety of meanings. It is commonly and differentially associated with equality. Equity is close in meaning to fairness, which is very different to equality. Equity related actions have long been associated with university education in most parts of the world, it was particularly so since the end of the Second World War. Depending on context, it is often associated with affirmative action in protection or promotion of considered disadvantaged groups. Although historically practiced, it has always been contentious particularly in the early years of its introduction in given contexts. In the case of the United States, it is still a contentious issue even in recent times (2019 precisely). A good example is the case of Harvard University admissions which was challenged in court as being discriminatory against

Asian-Americans. In fact, it presented one of the biggest legal challenges to affirmative action (Hartocollis, 2019).

According to Cassim (2005), equity means fair access to educational resources of equal quality and value. To Akoojee & Nkomo (2007), equity, equality and access are the metrics often used to measure or gauge the effectiveness of any public system of higher education. Using South Africa as a case study, the authors argue that access is used by the national government, universities, as well as stakeholders to widen opportunities in education to all citizens. This is done by removing all barriers, perceived constraints and impediments that affect individual or collective participation in educational activities.

Equity has grown to become one of the fundamental measures of effectiveness of a higher education system, alongside quality and efficiency. According to Richard James (2012), equity is therefore one of the ensuring issues for higher education policy makers, to be ignored at their peril. Equity is generally conceived as a social justice perspective to higher education. According to Gales & Densmore (2000), there are three perspectives to social justice: Distributive, Retributive and Recognitive. While distributive justice is about freedom, access, protection, and compensation for those who lack the basic, retributive justice is about liberty and protection of rights and property, including competition and punishment for those who infringed on these rights. Recognitive justice concerns the provision of the means for all people to exercise their capabilities and determine their actions through processes that generalize the interest of the least advantaged.

Although equity has become a universal attribute of higher education system and endorsed by different international organisations, there is no one clear cut understanding or mode of implementation around the world. The principles around it may be the same, but the demographic coverages and mode of implementation are largely based on historical context. Some implicit and explicit conceptions of equity in higher education include: those who have the ability to go on to university are able to do so; there are no barriers to access to university; the selection for university places is on academic merit, the selection of university places is without discrimination on the basis of social class, gender, religion or ethnicity. Others include, excluded groups are supported and encouraged to have university places; contextual social diversity is promoted in university education and all people have the same opportunity to develop their talent.

These conceptions may sound different, but the differences are subtler than often presented. Perhaps the Australian conception encapsulates these issues; it states that

the overall objective of equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of the society as a whole (A Fair Chance for All, 1990).

Generally, congruence between composition of the society and the university is one of the major definitive elements of equity in university education. Beyond this, it also involves vague notions like merit, fairness, equality of opportunity (James, 2012). It is important to recognise that none of these elements or concept is straightforward – they are all complex and problematic notions of justice and choice. Equity in education is therefore generally associated with one form of affirmative action/positive discrimination or the other. The mode and commitment to implementation may differ, but the principle is the same.

Most importantly, why is equity important in education? Scholars (Dearden, Reed & Van Reenen, 2000; Vernez et al., 1999; Osberg, 1998; Dayton-Johnson, 2001) and international agencies including the UNDP, OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF identified some factors as the major reasons why equity in higher education should be encouraged and instituted. This has also been reinforced by equity policies of countries like USA, Australia, South Africa, Canada, UK, France among others. These principles are driven by the fact that first, higher education is a major driver of social mobility – it confers significant benefit in terms of personal development, social status, career possibilities and lifetime earnings. Second, differences in access and participation in higher education across different demographic and social categories have a long term implication for national integration.

It is based on this that OECD also provided a number of reasons to support this;

- i. Right to Education: Human rights imperative for all people to have a reasonable opportunity to develop their capacities and to participate fully in society. The right to education is recognized.
- ii. Underutilization of talent and Implication for development: some people will not develop their skills and abilities with consequent loss not only to them but to the society generally.
- iii. Higher levels of education are associated with almost every positive life outcome – not only with improved employment and earnings but also with health, longevity, successful parenting, civic participation, and so on (Dearden, Reed & Van Reenen, 2000; Vernez et al., 1999; Osberg, 1998). Insofar as societies contain significant numbers of people without adequate skills to participate socially and economically, there will be higher social costs for security, health, income support, child welfare, and so on (Statistics Canada and OECD, 2001).
- iv. Social cohesion, or trust, is itself an important factor supporting successful countries. Greater inequality is associated with lower levels of social cohesion and trust (Dayton-Johnson, 2001; Green & Preston, in press), thus hampering countries' capacities in many areas.

Generally, the importance of education to the development of any country cannot be over emphasized. Most importantly, university education is the veritable platform for the development

of high level manpower needed to galvanize and sustain development in any country. Suffice to say that achieving the goal of development is a function of access to university education. Adegba (2006 cited in Odigwe & Swen, 2016) contends that, both adult and youth population in Nigeria place university education in high premium, hence the desperation to gain admission into the highly limited spaces available. Worse still, if admission into available spaces is to be based solely on merit, some sections of the country will be disadvantaged, hence the introduction of quota system to enhance access of the disadvantaged groups. This lend credence to the statement credited to Pityana (2009) that, for education to become meaningful, the circle of opportunity must be expanded and extended to the categories of people who might otherwise not be considered worthy enough and that everyone should be treated fairly.

Quota System and Equity in Education

The concept of quota is expressed differently in different countries. It is generally a way of operationalizing affirmative action. While it is called affirmative action in most countries including the United States of America (USA) and South Africa, it is referred to as reservation policy in India and a few Asian countries. Although there are differences in approach and depth of the policies across countries, the principles and driving factors appears to be the same. Quota system in education simply refers to allocating certain percentage to different groups which mostly could be based on race or ethnicity as a selection method for admission into government own institutions. Affirmative action seeks to achieve the same goal as quota system, the thin line of difference is only that explicit quotas is no longer being allocated as far as admissions into colleges and universities is concerned as it has been outlawed in the USA since 1978 (Faye, Aarti & Sirinda, 2006). Without prejudice to any conceptual differences, quota system and affirmative action in this paper is used interchangeably.

According to Wasson (2004), affirmative action encapsulates all gamut of issues that have to do with minority scholarship, diversity, reverse discrimination among others, designed to break down the wall of segregation that excludes racial minorities and women in education and work place. The aim is often to rectify the effects of past social discrimination. According to Lee (1999), affirmative action denotes an attempt to provide a level playing ground for all categories of citizens, with particular emphasis on 'disadvantaged groups' rather than injured individuals. This definition posits that, effort to redress perceived or real discrimination should not be done in a way that will injure any individual or group of individuals. To Chemerinsky (1996), affirmative action simply refers to the use of race by government in decision making to benefit racial minorities. The essence is to reverse involuntary discrimination. Weiner (1983) argues that affirmative action encompasses those measures that allocate social goods which could be in form of admission into universities or jobs among others on the basis of belonging to a particular designated group, in a bid to increase the proportion of members of that group in the population of university students or relevant labour force, where they are currently underrepresented, which could be as a result of their past or present discrimination. This is predicated on the desire to counter deeply entrenched

group-structured inequality that may not even be intentional. In a similar vein, Faye, Aarti & Sirinda (2006), postulate that, affirmative action takes place whenever organization devotes resources to ensure that people are not discriminated against on the basis of gender or their ethnic affiliation. They went further to differentiate between affirmative action and equal opportunity. While equal opportunity is a passive policy that seek not to tolerate discrimination once it is detected, affirmative action is more proactive in curbing discrimination.

Argument for or Against Quota System

Obielumani (2008) defines the concept of quota system as any selection method either for employment or admission into school whereby, some groups either based on sex or ethnic affiliation are given certain percentage. In a Nigeria specific work, Joshua, Olanrewaju & Loromeke (2014), observe that the application of quota system and federal character principle simply connotes giving special consideration to candidates from Educationally Less Developed parts of the country where educational facilities were more backward than elsewhere. From the array of conceptions above, it can be summarized that, the basis of quota system is to give opportunities to educationally disadvantaged groups and areas, so that they could catch up with the more develop areas in the country.

Opinions are divided as regards the practice of affirmative action or quota system. There are two broad lines of arguments, those for and those against. According to Chemerinsky those in opposition to affirmative action believe it inadvertently interferes with decision making based on merit. This is predicated on the argument that the absence of affirmative action will bring merit to the fore of decision making in admissions to government own universities. He also argued that affirmative action is unnecessary or undesirable because it harms innocent citizens as some applicants with better grades are denied admissions through its implementation. It harms them as it affects their progress in their educational pursuit. Thus, it is a medicine that harms its patients. Those denied admissions into university as a result of their state of origin so as to create room for the disadvantaged groups are harmed and this could lead to tension. In a related review, Parikh (2012), argued that the loss of one group is the gain of another group.

Other arguments against the system are that it does not treat people as individuals but as a member of minority groups; it exacerbates racial tension; it stigmatizes and demoralizes minority groups as their admission into universities are seen as a product of affirmative action even though some of them may be better than those not classified as disadvantaged group. Ultimately, affirmative action or quota system policies is seen as using discrimination as the solution to address past discrimination. According to Kaletski & Prakash (2016) it is possible for affirmative action or quota system policies benefits not to trickle down to the target group(s) as it could be hijacked by the elite population, thereby, exacerbating the spate of inequality it is meant to check.

Conversely, those in support of affirmative action argue that affirmative action is necessary to manage diversity. This is premised on the fact that, education is enhanced when student mixed with people of other groups of different race, class and background. Thus, affirmative action can be used to achieve the goal of improving learning experience. Others argue that affirmative action is necessary because inequality in education is a function of inequality in opportunity (Wasson, 2004). Similarly, Holzer & Nuemark (2005) argue that affirmative action or quota is necessary to remove barriers that minorities face in education opportunities. Thus, affirmative action is needed to counter these barriers to provide and sustain equal opportunity in access to higher education. Gupta (2006), sees affirmative action as a means of promoting equal opportunity in higher education. Colleges and universities are to enhance standards on one hand, and access and equity on the other hand. He views access to higher education as a right which must be protected by all democratic countries as well as international community. He sees affirmative action in admission into higher education as one of the means of enhancing equity. The contention of this study is that, going by the numerous opportunities it offers the educationally less developed group, it will be better to continue with it if the negative aspects associated with its implementation are addressed.

Types of Affirmative Action

Rhoads et. al (cited in Tabatadze & Gorgadze (2013) made a distinction between “backward-looking” and “forward-looking” affirmative action. “Backward-looking” argument of affirmative action focuses on the necessity of eliminating past injustice or paying compensation to correct past injustice against minorities that suffered discrimination. While “forward-looking” is creating opportunities that will make minorities to succeed in multicultural societies. Goldman (2003 also cited in Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2013) describes backward, forward, weak reverse discrimination and strong reverse affirmative action. Backward-looking discriminating programme seeks to correct past injustice, forward-looking discrimination programme ensure future opportunities to those that suffer discrimination, and weak reverse discrimination gives preference to minority candidates who by virtue of merit are equally qualified like the majority. Strong reverse discrimination gives preference to minority candidates who are less qualified than majority candidate. The final one is quota system in which some slots are reserved for minorities.

Generally, when government intervene in education sector, especially higher education with policies like quota system, affirmative action or reservation, it is to enhance access or bring to the fore equity and equality in higher education. According to Pityana (2009), equity includes equality of access. Cameron, Daga & Outhred (2018) define equality as a state of being equal in terms of rank, status, quantity, values and degree, while equity focuses on the social justice ramifications of education in relation to the fairness, justness and impartiality of its distribution at all levels or educational sub-sectors. Thus, equity mean that a distribution is fair or justified.

Quota System in Nigeria – A Historical Overview

Most scholars commenting on quota system in Nigeria often use it interchangeably with the Federal Character Principle. For example, looking at the works of Afigbo (1989), Eke (1989), and

Gboyega (1989), it is not very clear whether there is a distinction between the two. However, a deeper view of their arguments and other works reveals that quota system predates Federal Character Principle. While Federal Character Principle calls for equitable distribution of federal appointments to reflect the different dimensions of the nation's ethnic, regional and religious divide in order to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among the diverse people of Nigeria, quota system which is a forerunner of the former intends to give opportunities in education and employment to the disadvantaged groups and areas of the federation. Little wonder that Ekeh (1989) contends that the Federal Character Principle demands far more than quota system. The author sees Federal Character Principle as a legal weapon put in place to regulate appointments, promotions, security of tenure and severance in every government department. The next section takes a historical excursion into the origin of quota system.

Quota System in Nigeria 1948-1974

Quota system is Nigeria's conception of affirmative action, which might have been around longer than often recognised by scholars. It is almost associated with the history of Nigeria's university system. From the Elliot Commission that resulted to the establishment of University College in Ibadan to the Ashby Commission that resulted in the establishment of regional universities – UI, ABU, UNN, UNILAG, and UNIFE. They were all driven by the need to make university education available to Nigerians as a collective and later ensure all regions have access to university (Yoloye, 1989).

Although direct quota allocation in university admission was discouraged in the early days of the University College, the system recognised the need to encourage all regions of the country to be represented in the college. A visitation report in 1952 stated thus: "We suggest that the college, while admitting every woman and northern candidate qualified for university work, should firmly resist any proposal to accept or introduce a quota system". According to the report, this is because "a quota system of admission might lower academic standards, not only in terms of the quality of the student entry but also in terms of the work of the staff and students throughout the college. It will damage the college and would not assist the objective it was designed to serve (IUC, 1952 cited in Yolowe, 1989:54).

Yoloye (1989), observed that in spite of strict adherence to high standards and academic merit in the earlier days of university system in Nigeria, the authorities could not gloss over the need for more equitable distribution of students, both on the basis of geographical and male/female proportions. IUC's recommendation to address the problem of inadequate representation of Northern undergraduates, and female was the expansion of secondary schools with Higher Certification courses and the introduction of attitudinal change towards education of girls and to formal western type of education in the Northern parts of Nigeria. Thus, according to IUC visitation report of 1957 cited in Yoloye (1989), as at 1957, the proportion of students from Northern Nigeria, in the University College, Ibadan was just 3.6% while that of women students

was 5.5%. The report of IUC visitation panel in 1961 to the University College Ibadan is depicted in the table below:

Table 1: Admission into University of Ibadan 1961

REGION	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
WEST	537	47.3
EAST	452	39.8
NORTH	95	8.4
FEDERAL CAPITAL	9	0.8
S. CAMEROON	15	1.3
NON NIGERIANS	28	2.5
TOTAL	1136	

Source: IUC Visitation Report, January 1961

Even though the IUC expressed concerns about the low percentage of northern students in the University College in its report, it argued that it was an improvement on that of 1957 and therefore, made no suggestions for increasing the intake (IUC, 1961). However, towards the eve of Nigeria's Independence (1959), Fafunwa (1971) observed that the Federal Government set up a Commission headed by Ashby (Ashby Commission) to conduct an investigation into Nigeria's needs in the field of Post-School Certificate and Higher Education spanning twenty years. The submission of the Commission was far-reaching than the previous IUC reports. The Commission found that as of 1958, only about 9% of the children of primary school age were enrolled in the schools in the North, whereas, the enrollment in schools in the South (East and West) of the same age was 80%.The Commission went further to state that, in the same year, the enrollment of the children in secondary schools in the North was little above 4,000, while children enrollment in secondary schools in the South was 40,000.The report of the Commission emphasized the need to give special consideration to the problem highlighted.

Although it was not strictly within the terms of reference of the Commission to review primary and secondary education, the Commission did suggest that in order to proffer solution to the educational gap between the North and the South, the first objective should be to ensure that the North had enough candidates for secondary and post-secondary education to meet its own needs and to contribute its share to the development of high-level manpower in the country (Federal Ministry of Education, 1960). The Commission (Ashby Commission) went further to recommend the need for establishing new universities which must take into cognizance the principle of national unity. The principle of standards at this auspicious time did not receive similar recognition. The Commission rather emphasized the need to establish at least one university in each of the existing regions then. But added that it will spell doom if each university were to serve its own region. That the existence of borders among regions must not constitute barriers to the migration of brains (Federal Ministry of Education, 1960).

University of Ibadan was followed with three new universities, in the three regions of the country - North, West and East. These universities were established in response to the post-independent developmental and human resource needs of the governments of the regions. The universities include Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria in Northern Region, and University of Ife in the South West which later became known as Obafemi Awolowo University in 1962. Before then, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) had been established in 1960 (Balogun, 1973).

Maintaining standard and ensuring equity has always been a subject of debate globally. It was therefore not surprising that it became a dominant issue even in the early days of the university system in Nigeria. Although the merit-based system was sustained all through the colonial period, the context began to change in post-independence particularly on the need for human resource replacement for departing colonial expatriate staff.

Justifying the need for additional universities, Ashby reportedly noted in 1960 that

the need for higher diversity in higher education, all point to the need for at least one university in each Region. But we go on at once to say that it would be a disaster if each university were to serve only its Region. That there were strong regional loyalties in Nigeria we fully understand. But the borders between Regions must never become barriers to the migration of brains.

With the recognition of higher education as a major means of integration, there has been continued drive for central control for this purpose. As a very contested federal system, it attracted huge national contention particularly among academics which has continued unabated.

Quota System in Nigeria, 1975-2018

Although different elements of affirmative actions were practiced in the universities, its universality, particularly the quota system, followed three major developments in the university system. First was the central government's takeover of all universities in 1975; second was the promulgation of Decree No. 46 of May 31, 1977, which transferred university education from concurrent to exclusive legislative list; and third was the establishment of JAMB in 1977. The takeover allowed for the central control of admission and introduced quota system.

In order to ensure compliance to quota admission, the President-in-Council gave directive to the National Universities Commission (NUC) to work out a system of reward or inducement in form of grants to universities which complied with the quota for admission of students from educationally disadvantaged states, while penalties were to be meted out to those who disregarded the directive (Ike, 1982). The percentage changes from time to time. For instance, in the work of Omeje, Egwa & Adikwu (2016) the percentages for admission by the NUC 1999 were: academic merit 45%, educationally less developed areas 20%, catchment areas 25% and discretion 10%. In

2017, academic merit was 45%, educationally less developed states, 20%, catchment areas 35% (JAMB, 2017).

Although quota was introduced, academic merit was the dominant criterion – this involved JME, WAEC, A/Level exams, etc. For the purpose of this policy, Nigeria has been divided into Educationally Developed States (EDS), which are: Oyo, Lagos, Ekiti, Osun, Ondo, Edo, Delta, Imo, Akwa Ibom, Cross-River, and Anambra States and Educationally Less Developed States (ELDS) which are: Adamawa, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Benue, Bornu, Ebonyi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Rivers, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe and Zamfara (Moti, 2010), based on certain criteria, which are not clear, but it appears related to secondary school enrolment in each state and percentage of admission into universities.

In applying the criteria, the government also provided the following:

- i. If because of the pattern of applications and the range of courses offered by the universities, some universities cannot fill the places allocated to some states, universities are to consult the second choice list of candidates
- ii. In given university, no state shall benefit from both the criteria of locality and educationally less developed.

Catchment areas were also instituted. Catchment areas were clusters of states around the federal universities – they are to be given special attention. Discretion of universities was meant to cater for 1. Good candidates that would be dropped in the process of applying the various guidelines, 2. Foreign students for whom 2% should be reserved.

The trend in later years was for each state to have a university located in its capital. This happened following the creation of states and the expansion of sub-national political structures – first from three regions into four, then to twelve states shortly before the Nigerian civil war and later to nineteen states. Thus, nineteen state universities were established as at that time.

However, Ike (1982) had noted that, the report of the National Committee on university entrance set up by the Federal Military Government (in power at the time) as at December 1975 to study the problem of admission into the universities in Nigeria called attention of the Military Government to uneven distribution of Nigerian university students among the nineteen states. In fact, the Committee observed that six of the nineteen states (Anambra, Bendel, Imo, Ogun, Ondo and Oyo) with population far less than half of the population of the country accounted for 65% of the total enrolment in Nigerian universities during the period under investigation. In order to address this situation, the Federal Government established seven new universities, sited away from the aforementioned states. In addition, the federal government also established schools of Basic Studies in each of the eleven states which were considered educationally deprived; nine in the Northern part of the country and two in Southern Nigeria. The schools were funded by the Federal

government but controlled by the states where they were located as far as admissions were concerned. Each school was charged with the responsibility of preparing its students for admission to the universities and the schools were affiliated to the six older universities.

Method of Data Collection

The study combined both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data relied on survey method including questionnaire and key informant interviews. At the secondary level, the study relied on reports from JAMB, National Bureau of Statistics and other published and not published research reports. The multi-prone data were triangulated for analysis.

Stratified sampling technique was adopted in selecting respondents. Federal universities were selected across the 6 six geo-political zones. Each zone has a representation of one university as follows: in South West, University of Lagos; South East, Federal University of Technology Owerri and South-South, University of Calabar was sampled. On the northern side, we have Bayero University Kano for Northwest, University of Maiduguri for North East and University of Jos for North Central. The population of this study consisted of the academic staff, senior non-academic and students. The sample of this study was 50 academic staff, 50 non-academic staff and 50 students in each of the six universities picked in the geo-political zone. Stratified proportionate sampling procedures were used. A total of 900 questionnaires were administered in 6 universities, of which 750 were returned. Nevertheless, not all respondents responded to all the questions, some questions were skipped as would be seen in the demographic details.

The instrument for data collection was a 20-item researchers-developed questionnaire titled, Quota System: Equity Perspective. The instrument was divided into two sections. The first section seeks to elicit demographic data of respondents. These include gender, age, qualification, marital status, religion and highest qualification. The second section has fifteen items which sought to elicit opinion from academic staff, senior non-academic staff and students on the impact of quota system on educational imbalance and equity, and catchment area to see whether the policies have succeeded in redressing educational imbalance or has failed. The last section on it focuses on intervening variables like university carrying capacity and inadequate facilities to accommodate the growing number of students seeking admission into Nigerian universities.

Table 2: Demographic Details of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
SEX		
Male	395	55
Female	320	45
Total	715	100.0
AGE		
20 or below	144	20
21-30	202	27
31-40	93	13
41-50	135	18
above 50	161	22
Total	737	100.0
MARITAL STATUS		
Single	387	53
Married	340	46
Widow	6	1
Total	733	100.0
RELIGION		
Christianity	482	67
Islam	229	32
African Traditional Religion	6	1
Other	4	0.5
Total	721	100.0
EDUCATIONAL STATUS		
Undergraduates	148	20
OND and its equivalent	44	6
HND/B.Sc	316	43
Masters	119	16
PhD	100	14.
Total	727	100.0

Source: Survey Report, 2019

Of the 715 that responded to the question on gender, 55% are male, 45% female. Only 20% of the respondent falls below age 20. 80% of the respondents are therefore 21 years and above. In addition, 53% of the respondents are married, 46% single and 1% widowed. All the respondents are educated. Expectedly 20% of them are undergraduates, 43% are educated up to a first degree level, 16% of them have a master degree, while 14% hold doctoral degrees. The distribution of

respondents' religion shows that a very significant percentage of them are Christians. The table shows that 67% are Christians, 32% practice Islam and 1% practice the African traditional religion.

Data Analysis and Key Findings of the Study

This section analyses the major findings from the field work. It triangulates the field data derived from primary sources – questionnaires, key informant interviews and data harvested from specialized agencies like JAMB, NUC, NBS. The findings are therefore presented in simple qualitative form and descriptively based on the research objectives.

Objective 1 –Impact of Quota System on educational imbalance and equity

The variables in this section show the impact of quota system on educational imbalance and equity. The variables are explained in sub-sections accordingly. Differences in total frequency shown in Table 2 are as a result of the a few respondents who skipped questions in the questionnaires.

Table 3: The Impact of Quota System on Educational Imbalance and Equity

S/n	Variables	Strongly Agree		Agree		Undecided		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Total	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Promoted Access to University Education	266	35	245	32.5	38	5	139	18	64	9.1	752	100.0
2	Bridged the Gap between Educational Disadvantaged and Advantaged	117	15	250	33	104	13.8	188	25	92	12	751	100.0
3	Improved national integration	127	16	287	38	100	13	139	18	95	13	748	100.0
4	Reduced imbalance in university admissions	155	23	123	18	63	9.5	212	32	107	16	660	100.0
5	promotes equality across different segments of the country	186	25	219	29.5	66	8	144	19	127	17	742	100.0
6	Quota system should be retained	221	29.6	283	38	58	7.7	112	16	72	9.6	746	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2019)

Table 3 shows the impact of quota system on educational imbalance and equity. The first question examines the impact of quota system on access to university education by those considered to be from educationally disadvantaged states. While a combined 67.5 agreed with the assertion, only a combined 27.1% disagreed. Thus, according to the data obtained, the percentage of agreement is higher than those in disagreement. In other words, special consideration for educationally disadvantaged states has helped to promote equity in access to university education in Nigeria.

Although there are strong contentions on this in some of the interviews, as some respondents believe, it undermined equity by not adequately rewarding merit.

Some of those interviewed demonstrated good understanding on quota system. While some responses supported the findings from the survey, some differ but majority of those interviewed still hold that the system has significantly increased access. However, it is observed that access is not simply a function of a state one comes from. Within states, there are locations that are more privileged than the others when it comes to access to university education and this may not have anything to do with educationally advantaged or disadvantaged states. People living in remote locations even in the educationally developed states, could be worse than those in advantaged locations in educationally less developed states in terms of access to education. Others equally averred that, some persons from educationally developed states, denied admission as a result of their state of origin (largely from educationally advantaged states) often used other desperate and fraudulent measures to access education including changing names and state of origin to show a new identity.

Furthermore, the responses to whether special quota allocation has helped bridged the gap between educationally "disadvantage" states and those of the "advantaged" states. 48% of the respondents agreed, while 37% disagreed and 18% were undecided. This therefore indicates that the special allocation has helped bridged the gap between educationally "disadvantaged" states and those of the "advantaged" states. However, some of the respondents are of the view that quota system is only effective in the recruitment of para-military agencies and has not been effective in education sector. Although not all see the gap bridging process as fair; contending that it is a discriminatory admission process, which sometimes deny qualified candidates for university admission but consider candidates with lower scores because of reserved quota and affirmative action. Some are of the view that candidates from the north hardly turn up to fill their quota in the federal universities in the south. They assumed that it could be as a result of economic factors, distance, religious difference or fear of insecurity outside their immediate environment.

As regard whether special quota allocation has improved national integration through education, 54% of the respondents agreed, 31% disagreed and 13% were undecided. Thus, based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, the special quota allocation has improved national integration through education. Information from the interviews appears to contradict this. The contentions around the system is still deeply divisive and could be seen even among academics who are involved in the implementation. Second, universities across the country, especially in the southern and educationally advantaged states are still sociologically homogenous, there are few students from the north in the southern universities. While this may not be as a result of discrimination, as argued by some respondents, it is a reflection that some people are not ready to make sacrifices for

education and national integration. Some of the reasons include “lack of awareness, poverty, distrust for other parts of the country”¹.

Furthermore, the data shows that 41% agreed that the catchment area policy has reduced imbalance in university admissions in Nigeria, 48% disagreed and 9.5 were undecided. This finding reveals only a very slight difference in the degree of response on the policy of catchment area as a tool for reducing the imbalance in university admission in Nigeria. It is on record that some northern states hardly filled their quota. A former Vice Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Professor Sarror, (cited in the Guardian, 2017) once complained that eligible candidates from northern states could not fill their quota at ABU as all of them have been absorbed in the catchment area quota which is also not totally filled up. Little surprise that Adeyemi said, while some universities are under-enrolled, some are over-populated, thus, leading to under-utilization and over-utilization of resources respectively (Guardian 2017). The sentiment from universities in educationally disadvantaged states is that, the quota system is not being properly implemented. They observed that some of the universities in northern parts of the country are still dominated by students from educationally advantaged states, as other alternatives increased for candidates from educationally disadvantaged states, including private and state universities. Although the level of intake from educationally disadvantaged states have increased significantly, gap between the two in terms of university enrolment is still significant, probably not as wide as it used to be at the inception of the policy. Using gap analysis, Ebere & Ojowu (2019), in an attempt to explain the imbalance between the two clusters, argued that Admission rate for northern candidates increased over time. Education gap peaked 47 percent in 2011 and to 26 percent 2012.

Table 3: Education Gap Analysis

YEAR	% OF SOUTHERN CANDIDATES ADMITTED	% OF NORTHERN CANDIDATES ADMITTED	GAP IN ADMISSION
2011	74	26	17
2012	63	37	26
2013	64	36	29
2014	65	35	30
2015	62	38	23
2017	57	43	13
2018	52	48	4

Source: Ebere and Ojuwo 2019

Also, Table 3 reveals that 54.5% of the respondents agree that the quota system policy promotes equity across different segments of the country, while 36% disagree and 8% respondents were

¹ Respondents, University of Maiduguri

undecided. This means that the policy of the quota system has been helpful and impactful in ensuring equity across different segments of the country.

On whether the quota system policy should be retained or not, 67.6% agreed that the quota system should be retained because it has helped advanced educational development, while 26.6% disagreed, only 7.7% were undecided. This appears to be an endorsement of the principle around the policy even if some disagreed with the mode of implementation. From the responses of those interviewed, the problem of the quota system is the implementation and not the principle behind it. They will prefer to see the policy retained if it can be revised so ensure more inclusiveness and encourage merit.

Objective 2: Quota System and Education Imbalance in Nigeria

This section probed to elicit more details on educational imbalance in the country and examined how and why years of implementation of the system failed to address the challenge. There are differences in frequencies of respondents, occasioned by failure to respond to some of the questions.

Table 4: Impact of Quota System Policy on Imbalance in University Education

S/n	Variables	Strongly Agree		Agree		Undecided		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Total	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Failed to reduce educational imbalance	153	20	179	23.8	91	12	167	22	161	21	751	100
2	Prevents equity in access	121	16	165	22	79	10	212	28	169	22	746	100
3	Hinders equality in access	172	23	191	25	66	8.8	199	26.7	117	15.7	745	100
5	Hinder development of the educational system	144	19	162	21.8	60	8	197	26.5	179	24	742	100
6	Entrench further educational imbalance	133	17.8	164	22	60	8	225	30	162	21	744	100
7	The policy should be scrapped because it has failed	156	23	103	15	104	15	197	29.5	106	15.9	666	100

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Table 4 reveals that 43.8% of the total respondents agreed that the quota system policy has failed to reduce the imbalance between the educationally advantaged and less advantaged states in Nigeria, while 43 disagreed and 12% respondents were undecided. With almost an equal percentage of respondents on this issue, it appears to be a split of perception and understanding of this and a contradiction of the initial question on imbalances. Although, more people indicated that

the policy hasn't bridged gap, they appear not to agree with the concept of "failure". This may be associated with the fact that, some don't necessarily want to blame the policy, but implementation and other things that needs to be done before university admission. "The challenge is not admission, let's check and see what is happening in our primary and secondary schools in the north. What is the transition rate, between the different layers of education? There is nothing wrong with the policy, it hasn't failed, it is just that the right things have not been done".² One of the respondent averred to this that the policy has failed because the northern parts of the country still have the largest number of out of school children.

On whether the quota system policy prevents equity in terms of access to higher education in Nigeria, table 3 shows that 38% of the total respondents agreed, 50% disagreed and 10% respondents were undecided. This indicates that respondents disagreed that the system did not prevent equity in access. In the interview, there is a strong recognition of the inadequacies of the policy, but the policy is considered a global practice in enhancing access and managing national diversity.

Nevertheless, there are persistent complaint that the policy is undermining merit, what a respondent called "bright student from educationally advantaged states" for those with lower grades, it prevents equity. Some respondents, especially from educationally advantaged states, averred that some of the candidates from northern states often fail to come to the south to fill their quota. Even in their catchment areas, they hardly fill their quota that is why there is still a wide gap between the south and the north in education.

Generally, some of the responses, are informed by poor understanding of the policy and its politicization. Which is itself a failure. Every "good policy" should be properly understood by citizens. Curiously, despite the almost equal split in response on access and equity, majority of respondents, 48% agreed that catchment area policy, in particular, hinders equity in access to higher education in Nigeria, 42.4% disagreed and 8.8% of the respondents were undecided. The catchment area policy is seen as specifying where candidates from certain parts of the country can gain admission into a university, which is considered discriminatory. Generally, there is a strong perception in the southern parts of the country, whose states are largely categorized as educationally advantaged, that the policy is purposely designed against them and meant to retard education in the area, while the north catches up. It has always been criticized by the people from the south since inception. It is not a surprise that it is seen as preventing equity. Respondents' from the north appears indifferent to the questions, even if they largely averred that it is just and could promote access. They see it more as an affirmative action that benefits all, than a discriminatory one. A respondent noted that since "northern students hardly go the south, if you remove catchment area, it is the south that will be affected", because they have more candidates than the universities

² Interview with an academics, Bayero University, Kano.

in their area can absorb” 3. Even within the north, there are complaint by candidates from North Central that they hardly gain admission into universities outside their catchment areas.

On whether the system is undermining development of education in the country, majority of the respondents 50.5% don’t appear to think so. Only 40.8% agreed, while 8% were undecided. Although most respondents are averse to the system, its overall impact on education in the country is not generally negative; at least from the perception of the respondents.

Similarly, majority of respondents, 51% do not agree that the system is further entrenching educational imbalance in the country, as 39.8 agrees while 8% are undecided. There is a general tendency to see affirmative action as reversed discrimination. Many respondents argued along this line during interviews. Even though the policy is believed to be good, it is argued that the implementation is tantamount to discrimination against “brilliant students”.

Despite the historical and raging national contention on the policy, majority 45.4% disagree with the question on whether to scrap the policy or not. Only 38% agrees, while 15% were undecided. This corresponds with the earlier question on whether to retain the policy or not. It therefore shows that despite the inadequacies of the policy, respondents believe it should be retained, albeit with some modifications to deal with the gray areas that have been a source of concern.

Objective 3: Other Factors Affecting University Admission

The questions in this section show intervening variables between quota system and educational imbalance in Nigeria. Differences in total frequency are as a result of few respondents who failed to respond to some of the questions in the questionnaires

Table 5: Intervening Variables: Quota System and Educational Imbalance

S/n	Variables	Strongly Agree		Agree		Undecided		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Total	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	University carrying capacity	289	38.5	295	39.3	33	4.4	60	8	63	8.4	750	100
2	Inadequate facilities	358	47.6	280	37	23	3.0	51	6.7	40	5.3	752	100

Source: Field Survey (2019)

On whether there are other intervening variables shaping university admission and equity in the system, majority of the respondents, 77.8% as seen in table 5 agreed that university carrying

³ Interview, university of Maiduguri

capacity hinders equity in access to university education in Nigeria, only 16% disagreed, while 8% respondents were undecided. This clearly shows that university enrolment capacity contributes to inequity in higher institutions admission in Nigeria. Those interviewed are of the view that, in order to widen access to university education, the carrying capacity of the existing federal universities should be increased to accommodate more applicants. This will be discussed in detail under recommendation.

Furthermore, the table shows that 84.6% of the total respondents agreed that inadequate facilities to accommodate growing number of students affects higher institution admissions in Nigeria, only 12% disagreed and 3% of the respondents were undecided. This also reveals that inadequate facilities is part of the limiting factors in access. Nevertheless, respondents during interviews identified a couple of other factors undermining equity in education, especially in northern Nigeria, this include poor government and citizens' attitude to formal education at all levels, poor quality primary and secondary education, which are the recruitment grounds for university admission and poor transition from secondary schools to tertiary education. It is observed by many respondents that to bridge the gap between the educationally advantaged and disadvantaged states, it will require more investment at the lower levels of education.

Discussion of Results

From the array of respondents, starting from the first research question, which sought to examine the impact of quota system on access to university education, a significant percentage (67.5%) believed that special consideration for educationally less developed states has helped to promote equity in access to university education in Nigeria. However, some of the respondents interviewed were of the view that quota system undermined equity by not adequately rewarding merit. This is in line with the literature. For instance, while Ekundayo & Adedokun (2009) agreed that quota system ensures access to university education, Adeyemi (2001), Akpan & Undie (2007) disagreed.

Furthermore, looking at the issue that has to do with whether quota system has bridged the gap between educationally less developed states and the educationally developed states, the difference in the margin of our respondents is so marginal. From the interviews conducted, there seems to be split of perception. Those that had suffered from the implementation of the policy did not see anything good in its implementation.

Still, on whether the policy should be retained or scrapped, 67.6% of our respondents agreed it should be retained, but those interviewed gave condition that if it will be retained, it must be revised in such a manner that will encourage merit. In summary, people believe the policy is good if it can be tinkered with so as not to discourage merit and that carrying capacity of the existing universities be strengthened to widen access for potential candidates.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Although access to university education among educationally less developed states has increased significantly since the introduction of quota system, there is still a significant gap in university education between the EDS and the ELDS. While there are still challenges of carriage capacity of universities, the increasing number of universities since the 1970s, has improved the collective carriage capacity of the universities, thereby reducing the contention over quota system. The proliferation of state universities and the increased number of private universities have significantly affected some of the quota criteria like catchment areas and the ELD, since according to the policy, the two cannot be claimed by a state at the same time.

The indefinite nature of quota system is not allowing for regular reviews and context-specific engagement with the policy. For instance, what is the role of state universities and private universities in the system that were originally not envisaged by the policy? There hasn't been any comprehensive review of the policy since inception and therefore most of the arguments in the public domain about the policy are based on perception, politics and sometimes independent researches that are also garnished by these politics. The categorization of ELDS and EDS is too general and had remained unchanged, even with the increase in the number of states and federal universities. Geographical and ethnic approach to this categorization is not allowing for proper understanding of federal character and capturing of other excluded or less developed demographic categories – gender, disability, rural/urban divide etc.

There is still differential acceptance and understanding among academics and students across the ethno-regional divisions of the country, while more respondents from the ELDS believe it is good for the country, those from EDS see it as pandering to the other side and therefore promoting “mediocrity”. This reinforces the historical mutual distrust across the country. Despite the historical contention on the policy, it is believed to be a good policy for national integration, but should be revised to respond to some of its short-falls and make it compliant to development in university education locally and globally.

This study also found out that decision to apply to a university for admission is largely driven by economic factors, availability of proposed course of study, nature of cut-off marks in JAMB, and ease of admission probably by a facilitator. Remarkably, knowledge of quota system or catchment area, is not one of the most considered factors. The level of awareness of quota system and its different elements, has significantly waned among students and even academics. Although university admission officials are aware of this and try to comply based on NUC guidelines, it hasn't been a major issue in most university admission. There are other access challenges like quota for science and engineering course versus art and social sciences which also deny prospective candidates space in the universities.

Based on these findings, a couple of recommendations have been drawn from the study. They include:

Equity should not be restricted to geography and ethno-regional categories; other social variables driving inequality should be considered. This will include gender, disability, income, and rural/urban divide. Including these other demographic categories could help in creating a balance and reduce the contention associated with ethno-regional perceptions and politics. For instance, more opportunities should be given to girl-child education, especially in northern Nigeria. Patriarchal practices associated with discrimination have kept a number of girls out of school, socio-economic and political activities; depriving them from making meaningful contributions to national development. Case of child/early and forced marriages are rampant and are major impediments to girls' education. Universities should therefore be encouraged, if not mandated, to reserve a given quota of their admissions slots to the female gender.

Some people with certain disabilities are also denied admission. This is because some universities do not have facilities to cater for their peculiar situations. Government at all levels should make sure this is addressed and certain quota should be given to them during admission exercise.

Children of persons with lower income should be supported with scholarship so that the education gap between the children of the rich and the poor is minimised. Government at all levels should narrow the gap between rural/urban divide by making it a matter of deliberate policy to invest in social amenities; especially building more schools of high standard in rural areas. This will make it possible for the products of such schools to be able to compete favourably with students from urban areas.

The policy should be reviewed regularly within a clear timeline. It can be done within five years to gauge the progress made by states categorized as ELDS, and to also check whether those classified as EDS are not falling into the category of ELDS. There should be room for states to fall in and out of ELDS. EDS and ELDS categorization should be disaggregated even within states to take care of internal/state level inequities around education. Some of the respondents interviewed argued that parts of Kogi and Kwara states for instance should have been removed from ELDS going by the willingness of people in those states for higher education and the high number of persons from those states in higher institutions. There should also be disaggregation within states with respect to categorization as ELDS. For instance, some of the respondents interviewed argued that even though Lagos State is classified as EDS, yet, some settlements within Lagos like Ijora Badia, Ajegunle fall within ELDS (or better still, Educationally Less Developed Areas) in terms of educational facilities. In fact, they argued that some states capitals in the ELDS have better educational facilities than those places. And it is like that all over the country. The role and space of state private universities in the larger university policies should be clearly defined.

More importantly, in closing the gap between EDS and ELDS, government at all levels should embark on massive investment in education at primary and secondary school levels; especially in areas classified as ELDS, make it free, compulsory, very attractive and of high standard so that products from such schools will be able to compete favourably with their peers anywhere. Government at all levels, especially in northern Nigeria where formal education is less developed, should come up with stronger policies to ensure increased educational enrolment and completion especially in primary and secondary schools.

For this policy to play an important role in national integration and enhance equity, it must ensure national spread in access. As currently practiced, there are more students from the southern parts of the country in universities in the north, than there are northern students in the south. Although the study has shown that it has nothing to do with discrimination against the south by northern candidates but more about the number of students in the north willing to further their education in the south, except those from the north who are already based in the south.

Mechanism should be put in place to ensure merit or “qualified candidates” are not sacrificed for less graded candidates. A system could be designed to accommodate both affirmative action and merit. Although the concept of merit is epistemologically contentious, there is consensus that it is associated with examination grade. Affirmative action or quota system shouldn’t undermine “merit”, while “merit” doesn’t foreclose affirmative action.

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