



CATCHMENT POLICY AND QUOTA SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: TOWARD MEDIOCRITY IN UNIVERSITY ADMISSION

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria has 36 states besides the Federal Capital Territory and these states are grouped into six distinct geopolitical zones, three in the North and three in the South. The South has South-East, South-South, and South-West while the North has North-Central, North-East, and North-West. Northern Nigeria is considered to be educationally disadvantaged and in order to address the imbalance, the federal government of Nigeria framed the catchment policy and the quota system to close the seeming dichotomy between the educationally developed states and educationally less developed states in Nigeria. The policies ensure that prospective students are considered for admission based on their place of origin, merit or the discretion of the Vice Chancellor. The policies have profiled prospective students into educationally advantaged and disadvantaged individuals meaning that Nigerian prospective students have been restricted to seeking admission in some specific public universities in Nigeria. To better understand the policies, this paper, examines the effects of the catchment policy and the quota system on university admission and national cohesion focusing on fairness and equality. This paper is based on the assumption that university entrance scores are earned genuinely by prospective students seeking university admission in Nigeria.

Keywords: Catchment Policy, Mediocrity, Quota System, University Admission.

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BACKGROUND

Nigeria is the most populous black country in the world with an estimated population of about 239 million (Pontianus & Oruonye, 2021). Nigeria has 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory including 774 local government areas (NPC, 2019). Each of the states in Nigeria has at least one federal university. According to the information available on the National Universities Commission (NUC controls the activities of universities including accreditations in Nigeria)

website as of May 1, 2025, Nigeria currently has a total of 276 approved universities including 64 federal universities, 63 state universities and 149 private universities (NUC, 2025).

The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) was established in 1978 to conduct university entrance examination for students in Nigeria. Prospective students in Nigeria seek admission into Nigerian universities every academic session and to be considered for admission, a candidate must have sat and obtained the minimum required score set by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) (Omeje et al., 2016). The University Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) conducted by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board, is used to determine the qualification, suitability and competence of a candidate to be deemed eligible for admission in any Nigerian University (Omeje et al., 2016). The UTME does not undermine the importance of the Senior School Certificate Examination which students must pass before seeking admission through JAMB. The O-level examination is conducted by West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO). These examinations are referred to as the senior school certificate examinations (Agwu et al., 2022). Students are required to obtain at least five credits including Mathematics and English language before they can be admitted into any program of interest in Nigerian universities with the UTME scores (Agwu et al., 2022). Students with five credits and the required UME scores are required to apply to the university for the program of their choice (Agbaire & Dunne, 2024; Omeje et al., 2016).

University education in Nigeria evolved from western education system introduced by Britain through missionary activities which marked the beginning of modern education in Nigeria (Maiyeri et al., 2021). Maiyer et al (2021) note “that western education was received with less enthusiasm in Northern Nigeria for the obvious religious and political reasons. This trend continues to date” (p. 11). The poor reception of western education in Northern Nigeria over the years culminated into the North being educationally disadvantaged region accounting for the creation of the catchment policy and the quota system in Nigeria (Duruji et al., 2017).

Catchment Policy and the Quota System

The attempt in this section of this paper is to provide an understanding of catchment policy and quota system in Nigeria but before doing that, it is important to state that Nigeria practiced 100% merit in university admissions when the university college Ibadan was established in 1948. According to Duruji et al. (2017):

When the university college Ibadan was established in 1948, the admission was purely based on merit which was scaled against people from the northern region... The advantage, the south enjoyed tilted clerical and administrative positions in the colonial government in the favor of southerners to the dislike of northern leaders. As such the northern leaders were stoutly opposed to the independence agenda of Nigeria as championed by southern leaders because they felt that the north with the huge disadvantage educationally would be dominated by the south. Thus when the north got their self-rule in 1957, the leaders boldly came out with “northernisation” policy which aimed to have northerners occupy position in the northern administrative system which was hitherto occupied by southerners (p. 10).

The college focused on merit to the extent that the college's merit policy was perceived to be to the advantage of Southern Nigeria with the North being disadvantaged (Duruji et al., 2017). In order to bridge the perceived inability of the North to measure educationally to the level of the South, the quota system and catchment policy which Duruji et al (2017) call "obnoxious" were introduced to guarantee prospective students from the North access to university education in Nigeria (Duruji et al., 2017).

The quota system stipulates that certain university admission slots must be reserved for certain people with emphasis on population, ethnic consideration, level of education, and state of origin (Nweneazizi et al., 2018). The catchment policy on the other hand allows universities to reserve some university admission slots for communities that are contiguous to the university and prospective students who seek admission into universities that are not their catchment find it difficult to be offered admission as the universities must consider those of the catchment first (Nweneazizi et al., 2018).

In the university admissions process, quota system allows catchment to produce 25% of students that can be admitted into a university from contiguous communities where the university is located, educationally disadvantaged states accounts for 20%, merit is 45%, and 10% is reserved for the Vice Chancellor's discretion (Nweneazizi et al., 2018; Owmondah & Kalagbor, 2016). Candidates with the highest scores in the university entrance examination, that is, the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), are usually considered in the merit list and the merit list can only accommodate 45% of the highest scorers (Owmondah & Kalagbor, 2016). The UTME highest scorers who are not accommodated on the merit list are denied admission to give room for the consideration of catchment and educationally disadvantaged states (Owmondah & Kalagbor, 2016). This process allows some more qualified candidates who are not able to follow the merit list to be dropped and those whose scores cannot measure up to those who have been dropped from the merit list are considered because of catchment or status as educationally disadvantaged states (Duruji et al., 2017; Nweneazizi et al., 2018; Owmondah & Kalagbor, 2018). The catchment policy and the quota system as formulated by government in the late 1970s give advantage to some categories of prospective students above others. Nweneazizi et al. (2018) assert that:

The quota admission system portrays that a candidate from the southern state with university matriculation examination scores of 300 out of 400 may not get admission into the university but his/ her counterpart from the north with a lower score may be admitted. Similarly, a candidate with 280 score out of 400 from educationally advanced states may not get admission but his/ her counterpart from educationally disadvantaged state with lower score may be admitted. Thus the quota system has created inequality in the provision of university education and equity has been sacrificed on the altar of quota system of admission. Some candidates with better scores are denied admission on grounds of indigene and non-indigene dichotomy (p. 209).

The catchment policy and the quota system slow the educational development of some regions in Nigeria subtly encouraging others (by denying access to candidates with high scores in favor of catchment policy and quota system) negating the principles of fairness, and equality (Nweneazizi et al., 2018).

Federal universities ensure that they follow the quota system and the catchment area policy during admissions (Odigwe & Swem, 2016; Omeje et al., 2016). The catchment policy and quota system apply to the federal universities as state owned universities have all the local government areas in the state as their catchment (Agbaire & Dunne, 2024; Omeje et al., 2016).

As prospective students have continued to write the UTME to seek university access, JAMB does not publish the number of admitted and denied students in line with these policies. According to Jimoh (2024), 1,904,189 million students sat for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination in 2024 and there are no data on the website of Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board suggesting the number of students admitted or denied admissions out of 1,904,189 students who sat for the examination. JAMB (2025) announced that 1,955,069 sat for the 2025 UTME. University admission seekers increase every admission season unfortunately the universities are not expanding thereby making access difficult for many potentials students who are interested in university education and the prestige that comes with a university degree (Okoroma, 2008).

Implications

The catchment policy and the quota system are in violation of the principles of fair and equal opportunity for all prospective students irrespective of region, educational categorization (whether educationally advantaged or disadvantaged). Admission processes should be based on merit not catchment policy or quota system which have over the year's ensured lopsidedness in university access in Nigeria thereby entrenching unequal and unfair distribution of university admission spaces (Anagwo et al., 2020; Omeje et al., 2016). Equality and fairness help build trust and sense of belonging among people. Duruji et al. (2017) describes these policies as follow:

The policy of using the obnoxious policies such as quota system, catchment area and educationally disadvantage to determine access to university education in Nigeria effectively came following the advent of the military into the politics of the country when elements from the north who believed in the northernisation policy of the northern leaders in the first republic seized power at the centre (p. 10).

These policies do not only ensure lopsidedness in university access but create an atmosphere of fear, distrust, pain and disenchantment. Duruji et al. (2017) assert that:

These policies were implemented amidst complaints by the recipients or prospective students from the south who are denied access to universities year in year out in favor of northerners who score lower in the entrance examination conducted by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (p. 10).

In response to the complaints by students who were denied university access even though they had higher score than their counterpart in the north, state governments established state universities to cater to the admission needs of prospective students from their states (Duruji et al., 2017; Okoroma, 2008). The preference for catchment and quota policies by federal universities affect negatively the standard universities stand for (Duruji et al., 2017; Okoroma,

2008). Implications of the catchment policy and the quota system focus on: entrenching mediocrity and eroding meritocracy; divisive and discriminatory.

Entrenching Mediocrity and Eroding Meritocracy

University education is designed to train students in knowledge and character. Therefore, prospective students desiring university education must have the competence required by their program to excel (Nweneazizi et al., 2018). It is the responsibility of the universities to design policies to ensure that talented students have unhindered access to university education. Students are required to possess some level of educational attainment before seeking university education (Bound et al., 2021; Greenbank, 2006; Kacenga, 2017; Nweneazizi et al., 2018; You & Chung, 2021). Unfortunately, the catchment policy and the quota system have demonstrated that some talented students' ambition can be sacrificed in order to accommodate students from educationally disadvantaged states whose entrance examination scores are low. Nweneazizi et al., (2018) assert that:

Quota system when practiced is considered bad because people must suffer from it. Those at the border lines are always affected seriously. This is so, because they find themselves being rejected by virtue of coming from advantaged states. For example, if a cut-off point in admission is 270 based on merit in the faculty of Medicine, somebody who scored 269 may be rejected because he is from advantaged state while someone with 250 will be accepted because he is from educationally disadvantaged state. This is unfair because merit is not accorded acceptance (p. 211).

These policies lower the standard of university admission where merit is eroded in favor of ethnicity, region and educational categorization (Nweneazizi et al., 2018). These admission policies do not favor all except a section of the country, as a result, the policies have been described as obnoxious, political, ethnic patronage slowing down a section of the country educationally for the other (Duruji et al., 2017; Nweneazizi et al., 2018).

Giving access to a prospective student because they are considered educationally disadvantaged in Nigeria destroys excellence. It makes the talented student whose score is high to lose fate in the country's education system because the student's higher scores cannot give them university access. And when universities admit students with low scores on account of their region and nearness to the universities, they gain overriding advantage over the talented students whose scores are great but failed to secure admission because their regions is "too educated". The admission lopsidedness will not only affect student retention but the society that might be confronted with students drop-out owing to incompetence of admitted students with low scores (Nweneazizi et al, 2018). The policies are capable of discouraging the desire for merit and excellence by a section of the country while encouraging complacency in the other section of the country because their educational categorization and region have assured them of a guaranteed percentage of admission space based on catchment and quota system (Duruji et al., 2017; Nweneazizi et al., 2018). Admission policies should seek to enshrine fairness and equality by ensuring that all candidates are given equal opportunity to compete for the available spaces in

university admission in Nigeria (Nweneazizi et al., 2018). Omeje et al (2016) conclude that “merit should not be sacrificed on the altar of quota system and catchment area dogma” (p. 7).

Divisive and Discriminatory

A country like Nigeria that survived the Civil War in 1973 should not create policies that seek to fragment it. Discriminatory policies are dangerous to the unity of a country. These policies appear to have favored some prospective students (allowing their scores to be lowered) over the others in seeking university admission (Duruji et al., 2017; Nweneazizi et al., 2018). The catchment policy and the quota system divide the country into educationally advantaged and educationally disadvantaged society allowing a student from one of the divide to be punished (denied university access) for being talented and rewards the other for being lazy so long as they come from the educationally disadvantaged section of the country (Duruji et al., 2017; Nweneazizi et al., 2018). Nweneazizi et al. (2018) assert that the policies have:

Created the ugly impression that a particular section of the country must stop or slow down educational pursuit for the other section to catch up with her or even surpass her. This is a dangerous trend in a supposedly egalitarian society where no one should be oppressed or suppressed (p. 209).

The quota system and the catchment area policy put universities under legal constraints in recognizing the division and discrimination which have come with the policies. The fact that the universities are under obligation to admit students not completely on merit but the state of origin of the students create double standard and discrimination (Omeje et al., 2016). State universities practice indigene and non-indigene admission politics where the indigene of the state owned school favors the indigene of the state above a student whose score is higher in UTME but come from another state (Odigwe & Swem, 2016). Indigenization of admission by state universities hinders access by perpetuating state difference when the country is supposed to be one and ensures equality for all (Odigwe & Swem, 2016). The catchment policy, quota system and indigenization policy entrench exclusion. Agbaire & Dunne, (2024) while analyzing these policies assert that “On the one hand, the labels of ‘region’, ‘state’ or ‘catchment area’ homogenise distinct ethnic groups and on the other, their operation within the policy for equitable access produces profound levels of stratification, discrimination and exclusion” (p. 692).

Policies that recognize regional affiliation before a university admission is granted are capable of deepening division as noted by Agbaire and Dunne (2024) especially in a diverse country such as Nigeria with over 450 languages and ethnic groups and about 239 million people (Pontanius & Oruonye, 2021). The diversity of the Nigerian population is noticed in its language, culture, dressing, etc. This diversity should be managed by framing policies that will encourage citizens to seek university admission across the country without restrictions. The catchment policy and the quota system reward incompetence, discourage healthy competition among students from different states. Countries work assiduously to ensure inclusivity in all sectors including education. These policies do not appear to encourage unity but entrench social and ethnic stratifications because there is no equal access to the federal universities in Nigeria (Agbaire & Dunne, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Excellence should be the watch-ward of universities across the world including Nigeria. For universities to accept policies that tend to sacrifice merit on the altar of regional consideration, quota system and catchment policy as currently constituted and practiced in Nigeria is unhealthy for the country's unity and development. Nigerian universities have to seek policies that can ensure healthy competition among admission seekers instead of policies that defy equality and fairness.

The fact that a region is educationally advantaged or disadvantaged does not justify the imbalance that characterizes university admission processes in Nigeria. These policies cannot help Nigerian universities to have and maintain an all-round excellence required of a university. Universities can maintain excellence by ensuring that their admission processes are based on merit without admitting a candidate with high scores and another with low scores (below the standard) in the same department because the person comes from educationally disadvantaged state.

Recommendation

The paper recommends as follows:

- The policy should be discontinued to ensure fairness and equality in seeking university education. No section of the country should be encouraged to be complacent with catchment area policy and quota system. States develop at their own pace educationally and in other sectors. It is important that the government should invest more in establishing more universities and expand the existing ones in Nigeria. Universities should have the same criteria for admission in the country to ensure excellence, fairness and equality in the admission processes.
- Government and universities should have a rethink and jettison the policies and embrace merit. Every citizen should be allowed to compete irrespective of region. The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Examination Board should set equal cut-off points which must be respected and followed strictly by the universities in Nigeria.

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