ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
Higher education in Nigeria is given in universities, colleges of education and polytechnics and monotechnics. There are regulatory/supervisory agencies in-charge of these institutions. Every year, about a million or more students apply to enroll into these institutions, but barely 10% of them actually secure admission (JAMB, 2009). A lot of concern is growing about the teeming population of youths who want to gain higher education, but were unable to get admission into the universities. More universities are being opened, yet access is still a big problem at that level of education. This study therefore aims at finding out the challenges and solutions to access to higher education. What programmes and strategies could be introduced to promote access to higher education in Nigeria? Is there also gender equity in access to higher education in Nigeria? To carry out this study, two instruments were used: an interview to sift information on the challenges and the solutions; and enrolment data from federal, state and private universities, colleges of education and polytechnics and monotechnics. The Executive Secretaries of the regulatory agencies of colleges of education and polytechnics were interviewed, while data were collected from Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in-charge of Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) from 2008-2012. Data collected were analyzed qualitatively and through percentages. The challenges identified are: Teeming population of youths seeking for higher education; Insufficient (Facilities, infrastructure and Equipment), imposition of carrying capacity of institutions; Inadequate Information Communication Technology infrastructure, among others. Some solutions to the challenges were proffered among which are: Diversification of Secondary school curriculum to equip the products with varying skills; Focus on infrastructural development (Power and ICT) for e-education; Human capital development for higher education. It is hoped that improvement in access to higher education will contribute to attainment of sustainable development goals in Nigeria.
Key words: Access, higher education, sustainable development, gender, matriculation Examination.

Introduction

Education is the basic catalyst that will bring about development of an individual and the society. Globally, it is accepted that education is a process which facilitates development of human being physically, intellectually, morally, politically, socially and technologically so as to equip him/her to function in any environment he/she finds himself/herself. (Ikediugwu, 2015). The Federal Government of Nigeria (2007) sees it as a gateway to the future and the driver of national development. This is why in the National Policy on Education, the Federal Government reiterates “that education is an instrument for excellence through which sustainable national development can be achieved” (FRN, 2004: 4). This statement points to the need to train the citizens of Nigeria in different skills and competencies to empower them to contribute to the development of the country.

The essence of education is to inculcate in the learners the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that would empower them to solve the problems of their country. This would lead to sustainable livelihood. For the citizens to attain the goals of education, they need to have access to education. Access to education means the opportunities in institutions of learning, created for the citizens to gain knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to live a sustainable life. It simply means the right to education. It deals with the availability, convenience and ability to be educated (Offorma, 2010). Access to higher education is an ambition every Nigerian youth holds in high esteem. The students are aware that through access to higher education, they look forward to their dream jobs. Efforts are therefore made by parents, schools and the students themselves to ensure that they gain admission into the tertiary institutions. The high hopes are frustrated with students’ inability to gain admission.

The National Policy on Education (FGN: 2004) defines tertiary education as ‘the education given after secondary education in universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, monotechnics including those institutions offering correspondence courses’ p.36. Jowi (2009) sees tertiary education as part of globalization process which can no longer be regarded from the national perspective. Developing economies, especially Africa, (Nigeria being an African country) should focus on internationalization of tertiary education and on its attendant impacts to be able to attain sustainable development. Internationalization calls for globalization, while globalization demands information communication technology (ICT). This is a sine qua non for sustainable development and should be embraced in tertiary education. Offorma (2015), describes higher education institutions ‘as the hub of sustainable development activities and can promote development when linked to the internet facilities’p.222. She therefore recommends that higher education administrators should strive to provide access to the Internet in their institutions for the benefit of their students and staff.

The aims of tertiary education in Nigeria as outlined in the National Policy on Education are to:

- Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- Develop the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
• Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
• Promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
• Forge and cement national unity; and
• Promote national and international understanding and interaction.

These goals are pursued through teaching, research and development, generation and dissemination of knowledge, a variety of modes of programmes, access to training funds such as those provided by the Industrial Training Fund (ITF); Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES); Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), maintenance of appropriate standards through appropriate agencies, inter-institutional cooperation and community service. In spite of all these, higher education still experiences some clogs in the wheel of its progress.

Higher education in Nigeria is given in universities, colleges of education and polytechnics. There are regulatory/supervisory and quality assurance agencies in-charge of these institutions. The National Universities Commission (NUC) is the regulatory body in-charge of university education. The national Board for Technical Education (NBTE) monitors and supervises the mono-technics and Polytechnics; while the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) is the regulatory agency for colleges of education. These bodies are responsible for quality assurance of the different categories of higher education institutions. They see to the funding, through the Federal Government, curriculum development and implementation, accreditation of the programmes for quality assurance, effective administration of the institutions and admission of the students in collaboration with the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). It is the agency in-charge of conducting entrance examination known as Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and admission into higher education in Nigeria. In essence, they work in collaboration with these agencies to examine, select and admit qualified candidates in the different categories of higher education institutions according to the carrying capacity of the institutions. The carrying capacity of the institutions is determined by each regulatory body and it is based on the available human capacity, funding and infrastructural facilities for effective implementation of the programmes.

In the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) conducted by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) candidates apply once and indicate their choice and preference of course and institution. JAMB determines the pass mark (cut-off score) each year. After this, each institution conducts another screening examination and the average of the two scores is the final score of the candidate. It is based on this average that the candidates are admitted based on their relative score for the course of their choice. The admission is based on the performance in the examination and quota for the programme.

Access to higher education involves admitting qualified students who have satisfied the necessary conditions as specified by JAMB. JAMB thus specified eligibility conditions such as age, areas of discipline, school types and subjects to be written during the examinations, centers and processing fees. Unfortunately not all the students meet the criteria. The students chances of being admitted are further reduced due to logistics such as lack of examination numbers or/and centers, and distance to examination venues. The cut off mark to the different disciplines vary. Invariably, access to higher education becomes very competitive with marginal possibilities. Olukiran, (2015), writes that in 2010, there were 38,850 Nigerian students in universities in the States of A, United Kingdom, Canada, Malaysia and Ghana. Offorma (2013) supports this by writing that the inability of many sub-Saharan countries to accommodate the teeming population of students seeking for tertiary education has led to large number of
students pursuing tertiary education abroad. The exodus may perhaps, be as a result of challenges facing access to the Nigerian universities.

This year JAMB embarked on Computer Based Testing (CBT) for matriculation examination into higher education institutions, which was before now paper and pencil test. According to the JAMB Registrar as reported by Abutu (2015), ‘the internet age has come to stay with us, hence as actors in the new age, you cannot afford to stay on the fence, you must be prepared to join the train or else you are left behind’ p.16. The advantages of CBT are: it can stimulate computer and ICT education in Nigeria; it can eradicate examination misconducts; it provides immediate feedback or knowledge of result (KR); it can reduce costs and logistic challenges in examination administration. It is the best available technology for now (Benjamin, 2015). But the issue is that many students are not yet prepared for CBT and that may jeopardize their getting admission.

Access to higher education entails, adequate funding, because the more funds are made available to provide facilities and infrastructures and other basic needs, the more opportunities for access to higher education. The Federal Government appropriation bill for 2009 and 2010 show that 7% and 6.45% for the respective years were provided out of a total budget of N3, 445,410, 000.00 for 2009 and N4, 206, 465, 684.00 for 2010. The question is: are the monies enough to guarantee access to higher education for the teeming population of youths seeking for access to higher education?.

Ability to provide the necessary infrastructure and facilities will go a long way in achieving a sustainable development. Education for sustainable development is a “dynamic concept that encompasses a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. (UNESCO, 2005) This implies that access to education must be provided such that the beneficiaries will learn skills that will make them independent and sustainable. It also entails making provision for education for all irrespective of gender or cultural setting. It was for this reason that the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004) reiterates the need for equality of educational opportunities for all Nigerian children irrespective of any imagined disability. The equality of educational opportunities at the tertiary level where the learner is expected to acquire a high level manpower training that will contribute to national development remains a problem that needs to be resolved if Nigeria’s development has to be sustained.

Women have benefited in the expansion of higher education with an increase in enrolment. UNESCO (2010), indicated the percentage of women enrolment in higher education in Nigeria as 41%. This is lower than some other sub-Saharan African countries where women enrolment exceeded that of men as in Cape Verde (55%), Lesotho (55%), South African (55%) and Mauritius (53%), or at par with men in other countries such as Swaziland (50%) and Botswana (50%). Women are still underrepresented in higher education in sub-Saharan countries, Nigeria inclusive. It is crucial to consider gender equality in higher education which is a major issue in sustainable development. (Offorma, 2013).

The continued growth and expansion of higher education in Nigeria has contributed to the development of higher level manpower, though access to higher education has been identified
as one of the major problems in Nigeria (Aghenta, 2006). That is also why Obasi (2015) refers to access to higher education as an emergent issue in Nigerian education and believes that the problem can be alleviated through campaign, sensitization and advocacy as panacea. For Ivowi (2006), higher education institutions have visions and missions that focus on knowledge generation, dissemination and application in sustainability and development. To be relevant, the programmes of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education must address the changing societal needs. To attain sustainability for national development, measures were put in place by different countries on ways to encourage access to education. There are some global initiatives put in place to ensure access to education. They include among others:

- The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Thailand 5th-9th March (1990).
- The EFA 2000 declaration, the Dakar Framework for Action, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- Article 26 of 1948, the universal declaration of Human rights by the United Nations.

The Nigerian Government has demonstrated its acceptance and commitment to these initiatives by being a signatory to them. Their implementation has enhanced access to education at the primary and secondary school levels and created awareness to the youths of the values of education, thus their demand for higher education. The government has always tried to increase the number of tertiary institutions to accommodate the yearnings of the citizens for higher education. Generally, higher education institutions in Nigeria, despite their number as shown in Table 1 below, have not been able to absorb the growing demand which is as a result of broader access to primary and secondary education. There are 147 universities (Federal = 46, State = 40 and private = 61); 83 colleges of education (Federal = 21, state = 48 and private = 14); 95 polytechnics (federal =25, state = 40, private =30); and 27 monotechnics (federal = 23, State =2 and private = 2). These give a total of 352 higher education institutions in Nigeria. These institutions have the federal, state governments and private individuals as their proprietors. The federal and state governments respectively fund their institutions while the private proprietors are totally in-charge of funding of their institutions. Quality assurance is still the responsibility of the respective regulatory bodies.

**Table 1: List of Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proprietorship</th>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Colleges of Education</th>
<th>Polytechnics</th>
<th>Monotechnics</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>147</strong></td>
<td><strong>83</strong></td>
<td><strong>95</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>352</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources:

www.nuc.edu.ng/pages/universities.asp
www.ncce_online.edu.ng/colleges
www.nbte.gov.ng/inst_01html

Since the late 80’s, educational sector in Nigeria has suffered setbacks in a number of areas of which access to higher education is major. This is a country where most Nigerians prefer university education to colleges of education or polytechnics and so universities exceed their admission quota every year. Universities are constantly being inundated with admission request they cannot meet. The number of candidates who apply annually exceeds by far the vacancies.
available. For instance, over 1.5 million candidates apply annually for admission into universities nationwide but only about 500,000 are admitted. Some of these unsuccessful applicants become frustrated.

According to (JAMB, 2009), every year, about a million or more students apply to enroll into these institutions, but barely 10% of them actually secure admission. A lot of concern is growing about the teeming population of youths who want to gain higher education, but were unable to get admission into the universities. Again, many students were not offered admission in the faculties of their choice. More universities are being opened, yet access is still a big problem at that level of education. The problem of this study therefore is to identify the challenges to access to higher education in Nigeria and also to present possible solutions to the setbacks that would facilitate sustainable development in Nigeria. The study also compares the access to higher education in terms of gender, because there is a saying that when a woman is educated, a nation is educated; but when a man is educated, an individual is educated.

Four research questions guided the study:
1. What proportion of candidates are admitted into higher education?
2. Is there gender equity in access to higher education in Nigeria?
3. What are the challenges encountered in access to higher education in Nigeria?
4. What programmes and strategies could be introduced to promote access to higher education in Nigeria?

Research Method
The design of this study is ex-post facto. In a situation whereby the researcher in a systematic empirical inquiry, has no direct control on independent variables due to their inherent nature that cannot be manipulated, this design can be applied. There are no direct manipulations of the independent variables, rather inferences are made about the causal relationships among the variables. This type of research according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), asks ‘what factors seem to be associated with certain occurrences or conditions, or aspects of behavior’ p303. In this study application and admission data were collected from JAMB to identify access to higher education and two Executive Secretaries of NCCE and NBTE were interviewed to identify the challenges and the possible solutions to the setbacks.

The study was carried out in Nigeria, situated in West Africa; a populous country of about 170 million people. Nigeria is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation. There are three major religions: Christianity, Islamic and traditional. The country has six geo-political zones, namely: north-east, north-west, North-central, south-east, south-west, and south -south. To carry out this study, two instruments were used: an interview to sift information on the challenges and their solutions; and JAMB record on participation and enrolment data from federal, state and private universities, colleges of education, polytechnics and monotechnics respectively. The interview was administered to the Executive Secretaries of the regulatory agencies of colleges of education and polytechnics. The Executive Secretary of NUC was not available for the interview. Data were collected from JAMB in-charge of Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), from their published Annual Reports, for 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012. Data collected were analyzed using percentages. Any item that scores 50% is regarded as positive and vice versa. The interview data are analyzed qualitatively.

Results

Table 2: Number and % of participation and admission of candidates from 2008 – 2012.
The proportion of candidates admitted in higher education institutions from 2008 to 2012 ranges from 11.3% to 14.9%. This indicates very low access to higher education.

Table 3: No and % of Participation and Admission According to Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Application Male (%)</th>
<th>Application Female (%)</th>
<th>Admission Male (%)</th>
<th>Admission Female (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>1,054082</td>
<td>455394 (43.2%)</td>
<td>118,691</td>
<td>71328 (6.8%)</td>
<td>1,054082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>743,820 (57%)</td>
<td>562,285 (43%)</td>
<td>115,133 (8.8%)</td>
<td>75,653 (5.7%)</td>
<td>1,306,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1,404,111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1,575,522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>885,454 (56.1%)</td>
<td>693,722 (43.9%)</td>
<td>135,486 (8.7%)</td>
<td>99,040 (6.2%)</td>
<td>1,579,176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There is no gender parity in the proportion of male and female candidates admitted in institutions of higher learning. Again, the proportion of the admitted female candidates is lower than their male counterpart.

Discussion

Table 2 shows the total number of candidates that applied for admission and the number admitted for a period of five (5) years. It also shows the percentage (%) of the candidates admitted: 11.3%, 14.5%, 13.7%, 12.2% and 14.95 respectively. The proportion of candidates who were admitted form 2008 – 2012 is appalling. It is evident that access to higher education in Nigeria is a big problem. Very few qualified candidates were admitted as can be seen from the small percentage of the candidates that gained admission in the institutions from 2008 to 2012. The researcher could not access the data for 2013 and 2014 from JAMB office. The 2015 admission is still on-going and so the data are not available. The finding supports JAMB (2009) that recorded that barely 10% of the candidates succeeded in gaining admission. Aghenta (2006) and Obasi (2015) had already reported that access to education is a very big problem and an emergent issue.

Table 3 shows the male/female proportion of participation and admission into higher education. The disparity in the proportion of male and female candidates admitted in the institutions is glaring.
The proportion of the males admitted is higher than that of the females, but both are appalling. The major implication of this result is that Nigeria’s teeming youth population is starved of higher education. Their dream is to gain admission into higher education institutions to acquire high level knowledge and skills needed for sustainable development of the country. The problem of access has made to youths who have the fund to seek admission outside the shores of Nigeria.

The interview held with the Executive Secretary of National Commission for Colleges of Education, Professor Joshua Monday and the Executive Secretary, National Board for Technical Education, Dr Amina Idris, revealed the following as the challenges to access to higher education in Nigeria.

1. Teeming population of youths seeking for higher education.
2. (Facilities, infrastructure and Equipment).
3. Lack of inadequate funding for higher education.
5. The imposition of carrying capacity of institutions
6. Inadequate Information Communication Technology infrastructure
7. Absence or low sponsorship in terms of free and loan scholarship by governments and communities.
8. The number of higher institutions is still very insufficient to cater for the teeming number of youths.
9. High cost of higher education
10. Inadequate qualified teaching Staff

The solutions to the challenges as presented by the Executive Secretaries include the following:

1. Diversification of Secondary school curriculum to equip the products with varying skills.
2. Increase in allocation of fund to education.
3. Focus on infrastructural development (Power and ICT) for e-education.
4. Human capital development for higher education.
5. Restoration of sponsorship/ Students' loans as was in the 1960s – 1980s.
6. Building of more institutions of higher learning.
7. Private organizations to train more students.

The above is the summary of the challenges the Executive Secretaries presented as the challenges that hinder access to higher education and some solutions. Nigeria’s population is estimated at 170, million people. Higher education institutions, especially universities are overwhelmed with admission requests that they cannot cope with due to insufficient funding, inadequate infrastructure, facilities, ICT and qualified teaching staff. These are the factors considered by the regulatory bodies to determine the carrying capacity of the institutions.

In the 1960s - 1980s, government gave Student Loans to higher education students to assist them in their education. That facility was abused by many beneficiaries by not refunding the government, and so it was stopped. But with ICT, the implementation will be better done today as electronic devices abound to monitor such programmes.

With ICT, on-line courses can be mounted by the institutions which will accommodate as many students as possible with less cost. Distance learning has been introduced by some institutions, but it is not yet popular.
In spite of the increase in the number of universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, the number of youths yearning for higher education is enormous. The government should not rest on its oars until enough institutions are created. Institutions should avail themselves of the funding opportunity by TETFund in human capital development and encourage their staff to avail themselves of that opportunity. TETFund also supports institutions in proving infrastructural facilities and institutions should avail themselves of the opportunity.

To study abroad is very expensive. It is only students who can afford it that can benefit from it. The government should increase the number of students who are given scholarship to read abroad as that would also help to reduce the problem of access to higher education.

Diversification of secondary school curriculum to equip the students with varying skills will help a lot to solve the problem of access to higher education. Many youths clamour for university education because they do not have skills that will make them self-reliant. It is true that both at the secondary school and higher education levels, entrepreneurship is a core course. The essence is to equip the school leavers with some skills to cope with. If they have learnt some saleable skills in the school, admission request will be reduced and they will still be able to contribute to the development of the society and can even be an employers of job.

**Recommendations**

To offset the challenges of access to higher education, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government should increase access to higher education by building more schools, and by exploring an alternative mode of schooling through e-education, distance on-line learning.

2. Institutions should train their staff in ICT so that they can apply the new technology in administrative and pedagogical responsibilities to improve access to higher education.

3. Teachers should be well trained in the implementation of diversified curriculum at the secondary schools so as to impact positively on the students.

4. Higher education institutions should focus on human capital development so as to produce many more faculty to impact on access to higher education.

5. Students’ loan scheme should be restored to assist the poor but intelligent students to have access to higher education.

6. TETFund should sponsor more infrastructural projects in higher institutions so as to provide the required infrastructure to accommodate more students.

**Conclusion**

For Nigeria to join other nations of the world in pursuing sustainable development, human capital development should be the focus. Access to education enhances sustainable development in other spheres of life. Women should be carried along as they are very close to nature and contribute immensely to the development of the nation. They must be trained to be
able to carry out their functions effectively. It is hoped that improvement in access to higher education will contribute to attainment of sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

References