

**PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE, QUOTA SYSTEM  
POLICY AND QUALITY TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

By

**DAUDA ISAAC CHOJI,**

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education  
University of Jos

&

**SHINGA JOSEPH ALPHONSUS**

Department of Educational Foundations,  
School of Education, Federal College of Education Technical Gombe

&

**Prof. DAKU NOAH JIMBA**

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education  
University of Jos

## **Abstract**

This work is a reflection of distributive justice and the quota system policy of admission in Nigeria with special consideration on its effects on the quality of tertiary education in Nigeria. Quota system policy of admission is a policy that hinges on the principles of distributive justice. Distributive justice principles call for fairness and equity in the distribution of limited national resources. The research discovers that the application of the policy itself gives room for compromise on the quality of tertiary education by allowing the admission of less qualified candidates from educationally underdeveloped states where opportunities are yet to be taken up to the disadvantage of more qualified candidates from educationally developed states. By this, competition to obtain high grades among students is reduced to the barest minimum or through malpractices because a reasonable percentage of these candidates came in with learning deficiencies. The multiplier effects of quota system policy include; examination malpractices, campus prostitution, cultism and inefficiency in the world of work. The research concluded that in order for the tertiary education to meet up with the aim and objectives of her establishment as well as compete favourably with her counterparts elsewhere in the world the policy of quota system of admission should be removed.

## **Introduction**

All desirable developments in the society hinge upon education to see the light of the day. It is therefore, not surprising that the issues of education become of concern to every stakeholder in the society and usually generate a lot of arguments, tension and sometimes agitations among the citizenry. Though, a particular educational issue may dominate the scene at a particular point in time, it is interesting to note that hardly any of them has ever been completely resolved. They may be temporarily forgotten or overtaken by events, but they have a tendency of re-emerging in the same or slightly modified form in the future. In other words, they have become perennial. Therefore, a philosophical reflection on some of these issues will be of help keeping the present generation of educationist on track with past and current educational issues.

Arguably, one of such educational issues that have assumed perennial status is the debate on equality of educational opportunities on the Nigerian educational scene. The heat, emotions and agitations the debate on equality of educational opportunities generated gave birth to the Quota system policy introduction in the 1970s into the education system. The quota system seems to have gained a permanent seat in the educational terrain owing to the fact that education like other natural and human resources which are not so much in abundance to the extent that each can dip his hand into and take for himself as much as he wants without shortening the ration of others. In other words, so long as resources are limited and people's demands are unlimited there will always be the question of criteria for distributing the resources and the all-important question of fairness and equity of the distributing system.<sup>1</sup>

Justice, fairness and equity issues in the distribution of educational opportunities become phenomena of concern to all and sundry because years over Nigeria has looked to education to solve some major problems raised in other critical areas of national life. For instance, economic issues such as the disparity between the rich and the poor and the disparity between the rural and urban areas are attributed to education. Political challenges such as differences in political

awareness, hence disparity in the level of political participation; and the civilization as well as literacy gap between the Northern and Southern parts of the country are all attributed to educational opportunities and basic amenities distribution in the long run.

The foregoing instances are all cases of transfer of issues and problems from non-educational areas into education arena seeking for solution. It is worthy of noting at this juncture, that these economical, political, cultural and social issues and problems are interpreted in terms of the absence of education or the past unequal distribution of educational opportunities to various parts of the country. In order to overcome these challenges, the principles of distributive justice, fair play and equity are always invoked at the detriment of merit and quality of the products of education. These principles are invoked in the spirit of fostering “a just and egalitarian society” and “a united, strong and self-reliant nation”<sup>ii</sup> all and sundry must be carried along in the distribution of all educational opportunities available for all to have a sense of national unity. To this end, the questions that beg for answers; can there be unity where injustice prevails? Should quality education in Nigeria be sacrificed at the altars of fair play, equity, national unity? When the administration of distributive justice turns into injustice herself what is the possible way out now? Is distributive justice a perfect formula for the sharing of educational opportunities in Nigeria as far quality is concern?

### **Quality Tertiary Education**

Federal Government of Nigeria through the National Policy on Education broadly classifies education into different levels via; Nursery and Primary level, Secondary level and Post-Secondary or tertiary level. This classification facilitates and enhances teaching in the graded manner so that every matter is dealt with at the ages where physical and mental capacity can cope with the appropriate level of study. To this end therefore;

Tertiary education is the education given after Post-Basic Education in institutions such as Universities, and Inter-University Centres such as the Nigeria French Village, Nigeria Arabic Language Village, National Institute of Nigerian Languages, institutes such as Innovation Enterprise Institutes (IEIs), and Colleges of Education, Monotechnic, Polytechnics and other specialized institutions such as Colleges of Agriculture, Schools of Health and Technology and the National Teachers’ Institutes (NTI).<sup>iii</sup>

These categories of institutions made up the tertiary education level in Nigeria with the university as the apex institution of learning among them all. The Federal Government of Nigeria also clearly spells out the goals of Tertiary Education to include;

Contribution to national development through high level manpower training; provide accessible and affordable quality opportunities in the formal and informal education in response to the needs and interests of all Nigerians; provide high quality career counselling and lifelong learning programmes that prepare students with the knowledge and skills for self-reliance and the world of work; reduce skill shortages through the production of skilled manpower relevant to the needs of the labour market; promote and encourage scholarship, entrepreneurship community service; forge and cement national unity; and promote national and international interaction.<sup>iv</sup>

These are the task of tertiary education to provide the Nigerian world of work and beyond with highly skilled manpower relevant to the needs of the labour market. This shows that the society depends on the tertiary education for labour and whatever quality of products the tertiary education offers that is what the society gets. No wonder the saying a society cannot rise above her quality of education.

Quality as a concept has been viewed differently by different scholars due to its multidimensional meaning which has also assume different meanings to different people. According to Fadipe<sup>v</sup>, quality can be regarded as “fitness for purpose”. It encapsulates the concept of meeting commonly agreed standards. Such standards may be defined by law, an institution, a coordinating body or a professional society. In the diverse arena of tertiary education, fitness for purpose varies tremendously by field and programme. Quality refers to the standard of a phenomenon when it is compared to other things like it: how good or bad something is, that is, to be of good/poor/top quality or of a high standard. In the context of this paper, it is associated with the ‘monitoring and evaluation components of education’ to assess whether or not the outcome is good and of the intended standard. Quality is the ability or degree with which a product, service or phenomenon conforms to established standards and which makes it to be relatively superior to others. With respect to education, this implies the ability or degree with which an educational system conforms to the established standards and appropriateness of the inputs available for the delivery of the system. Therefore, quality education means the relevance and appropriateness of the education programmes to the needs of the society for which it is provided.

On the other hand, quality education is that education that is relevant and adapted to the needs of the society.<sup>vi</sup> It is in this line of thought that Majasan<sup>vii</sup> is of the view that quality education is value-loaded arguing that quality education should produce disciplined behaviour, hard work, improved cultural heritage and mutual respect within and outside the school community. If a society expects quality manpower for rapid development and transformation, quality education is inevitable. This is because quality education is necessary to address critical issues via dignity of labour, quality leadership, committed citizenship, industrial harmony, political stability, religious tolerance, self-reliance and security. Therefore, quality tertiary education entails the products of tertiary education to perform optimally to meet up set standards and compete favourably with their peers from other parts of the globe.

### **Distributive Justice**

Justice as Fairness: this theory is championed by John Rawls in his work *A Theory of Justice* where he hypothesized the administration of justice in the society. Rawls opines that the principles of justice which form the foundation of the society are arrived at through agreement as suggest by Locke’s social contract theory. Borrowing concepts from the social contract theory, Rawls envisions a society in which the principles of justice are founded in a social contract. Having identified the problems and faulty areas of the social contract theory as propounded by Locke that hinder fairness and equity among members of the society Rawls hypothesized a social contract which is negotiated behind a “veil of ignorance”. The veil of ignorance for Rawls means a circumstance where the negotiating partners have no idea what their race, gender, education, geographical location, health and other characteristics are; how

the various alternative will affect their own particular case, yet are obliged to evaluate principles primarily on the basis of general considerations.

Perusing the theory of justice as fairness as propounded by Rawls certain questions readily come to mind; what exactly does Rawls meant by “veil of ignorance”? Is Rawls trying to say that the various professionals (let us say in the case of education teachers and professors; in the case of health, health consultants and health professors; in the legal sector, legal luminaries, judges and justices just to mention but a few), stakeholders involved as well as consulted at various stages of the negotiations reached are not well informed in their respective fields of endeavour to take a decision or predict a risk as well as a likely advantage on behalf of the citizenry? Or could it be the case that Rawls is saying that at given material time the various factors at play definitely warrant the negotiating partners to reached a decision but cannot with all certainty guarantee whether or not such a decision will continue to favour his on society, group or organization in the future when new or unforeseen factors may likely alter the reality on ground.

Consequently, if Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’ means that the negotiating partners cannot rule out the likelihood of other factors that may come to play in the future to destabilize previously perceived fair negotiations or decisions, it then follows that a decision or negotiation as well as a particular policy can only said to be fair or just in a given material time and circumstance not at all times. In other words, a fair and just policy or negotiation is always dependent on the factors at play and will remain open to new negotiations relying on the factors at play at a given material time to be considered by the various negotiating partners.

Utilitarianism Distributive Justice: this theory is found in the works of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarianism centres her theory of justice on individual utility and welfare. It builds on the belief that any action which increases the overall welfare in the society is good and any action that decreases the welfare in the society is bad. By this understanding focus lies with its outcomes and pays little or no attention to how these hope outcomes are shaped. However, the utilitarian theory of justice is challenged on the grounds with regards to how one can clearly delineate those actions which constitutes welfare and those that do not.

The question that comes to mind perusing this theory of justice is; what are those actions/inactions that promote the welfare of members of the society? For this theory to be implemented in a society the need to identify the various actions and inactions of the members of the society that will encourage the common good of all in the society be carried out. This raises another question in the mind. What is the criterion for identifying those actions and inactions that will increase the good of one and that of others in the society and the other way round? Therefore, there is no guarantee that the criterion that will be put in place may not likely violent a number of basic human rights that would possibly generate new problems in the society. Out of curiosity one may be tempted to further ask; if such a criterion is put in place, will it be a valid criterion all through other circumstances or it will be a onetime criterion? To this end therefore, what constitutes justice in one circumstance may likely not be justice in another circumstance.

**Egalitarianism Distributive Justice:** this principle of justice is built on the notion of equal worth and moral status of human beings. It is concerned with equal treatments of all citizens in all respect and in relation to the state as well as one another. egalitarian distributive justice focuses more on the process through which distribution takes place, evaluates the justification based on how the society and its institutions have been shaped rather than what the outcomes is.

Equalitarianism likely sees human beings from a lens that seems to portray human beings to be the same regardless of their differences in terms of their needs, wants, desires, height, weight, race, tribe, religion and geographical locations. These differences are sufficient grounds through which human beings ought not to be regarded as equals nor treated equally in many ramifications. Therefore, the principles of equity and fairness are invoked in every society whenever ‘equals are treated unequally’ and ‘unequals are treated equally’. This act of treating equals unequally and unequals equally in itself is likely considered as an injustice in some societies. Since, humans are not all equal owing to the aforementioned factors it will amount to an injustice to treat equals unequally and treat unequals equally. To this end, justice will mean given to each individual or group of individuals his due. The question that comes to mind is what is the individual’s due? What the criterion is for determines the individual’s due?

The challenge with this theory of justice is that it labels humans to be of equal worth therefore, any treatment must be measured on the same scale relegating any other factor or attribute to the background. It is inconsistent by treating un-equals equally in the first instance as Aristotle who say. If everybody stands the chance of getting equal ration of the reward of labour at the end of the month then many may tend not to put in their best in the services, they provide in the system they belong to.

### **Quota System Policy of Admission; fairness or Breeding mediocrity?**

Quota system is a policy in Nigeria that allocates percentage of access to socio-economic, political or any other benefit to a given set of people based on factors such as gender, geographical area or a certain group of the country. This policy was first introduced in Nigeria by the colonial government in 1958 as a solution to agitations seeking equal access to public offices and representation in the political arena by various groups.<sup>viii</sup> The thrust of this policy lies on its principle of distribution of available opportunities to different unites or parts of the country not necessarily based on merits or quality of the applicants. In other words, this principle offers socio-economic and political opportunities to Nigerians based on state of origin’s percentage not only merits. Therefore, the chances of one accessing certain socio-economic opportunities is determined by the number of other applicants from one’s state of origin or geographical area not necessarily skills he has mastered and demonstrated at the recruitment exercise. It is evident in the foregoing that quota system hinges on the theory of distributive justice to allow for fair and equitable sharing of scarce resources and opportunities across board.

The quota system policy found its way into the Nigeria’s education arena with the aim of addressing disparities in the socio-economic and political development of identified geographical areas. In order to implement the quota system in the educational sector, states were categorized into; educationally advantage also known as educationally developed and educationally disadvantage also known as educationally underdeveloped states<sup>ix</sup>. In the light

of the foregoing, Odigwe and Swem opine that “quota system of admission allows admitting only a certain percentage of candidates from each state of the country into schools in one academic year.<sup>x</sup> This shows that the thrust of quota system of admission is the distribution of educational opportunities to various states of the country. In other words, educational opportunities are reserved to applicants on the basis of their states of origin relegating merits to the background.

Consequently, relegating merits to the background usually comes with multiplier effects in the long run in any given society. One of the effects of quota system policy of admission is that it waters down the quality of the tertiary education system and by implication her products too. Demonstrably, sacrificing merits at the altar of fairness, unity and justice gives room for compromise as far as quality tertiary education is concern in that candidates with learning deficiencies, ill-equip to study in the tertiary institutions are offered the opportunity thereby end up struggling to survive in the system. The mere presence of these unqualified candidates reduces the competition for excellence in the system among students. Whenever a reasonable percentage of the students are having some learning deficiencies at various degrees this reduces the job of the lecturer from imparting knowledge, skills and competencies of his subject area into a remedial services render. This practice inferably, reduces competition among students. Therefore, when students do not strive for excellence in their academic pursuits their efficiency in the world of work will be affect too.

Thus, the quality of the products of tertiary education gets questioned whenever the aim or any of its objectives is not met up with especially in the world of work via; development of high-level manpower training, prepare students with the knowledge kills for self-reliance and reduce skills shortage in the world of work. For instance, a quality knife cuts things to the satisfaction of the owner. Therefore, are the products of our tertiary education measuring up to the demands of the world of work in Nigeria adequate? The issues of quality in the tertiary education system have been attributed to the rampant news of collapse buildings some even still under construction in Nigeria; Nigeria refining her crude oil elsewhere; importation of automobiles and seeking major medical services outside Nigeria. it is worthy of noting down here that people die in hands of ill equip medical doctors, people die and resources worth billions lost in collapse buildings, the agricultural sector losses billions upon billions of naira in the hands of ill equip veterinarians and agronomists.

The problem of examination malpractice in tertiary institutions of learning is also traceable to the quota systems application. The policy intentionally allows candidates with learning deficiencies into the system yet encourages high performance and rewards it at the end of the day. These students with learning in competences in the quest to measure up to the expectations of the school end up engaging in examination malpractice. Wherever malpractices exist in the system the standard and quality cannot be sustained any longer. For quality to be sustained in our tertiary education the postulations of Plato need to taking seriously where people ascend through the levels of education purely on the basis of merits and capabilities and eventually only the philosopher kings get to helms of affairs by merits handling their task conveniently.

The factors that affect the quality of a product are usually multifarious in nature. In the case of tertiary education, the learning environment could be a factor, the instructional material, the

quality of the teacher, the home background of the learner and exposure of the learners hitherto. Of concern in this work among these factors is the home background of the learner and their exposure before gaining admission into the tertiary institution. The nature of groom students right from primary level and secondary levels of education manifest itself on the calibre of students seeking for admission into the tertiary institutions of learning. What this means is that for quality and to be maintained and the quota system policy tension calm down in our tertiary education the necessary attention must be given to our primary and secondary levels of studies in order to create a fair playing ground for the competitive placement examination into the tertiary education. Other multiplier effects of quota system policy of admission in our tertiary education include campus prostitution, cultism and truancy.

As currently practiced in Nigeria, the guideline of quota system of admission stipulates the following; 45% of admissions based on merits as determined by the UTME scores, 20% allocated to educationally advantage areas, 35% allocated to catchment areas<sup>xi</sup>. The application of this policy in tertiary education admission seems to contradict itself in that, it aims at serving justice to states that have be categorized as educationally underdeveloped and end serving injustice to states that are categorized as educationally developed in the long run. This policy denies qualified candidates of educational opportunities on the bases of state of origin while offers same opportunities to lesser qualified candidates. Arguing from the egalitarian perspective of justice at face value it may seem justified that the policy encourages even distribution of educational opportunities across board for all sections of the country to have a sense of belonging. With the foregoing in mind, the questions bellow beg for answers; those qualified and were discriminated to the advantage of those performed less than them on the basis of quota system policy are they not humans too? If they are humans too then where is the equalitarianism in this practice?

### **Conclusion**

The instrumentality of Nigerian tertiary education in ensuring high manpower training to respond to the need of the labour market as well as rapid socio-economic developments among individuals and the international scene is imperative however, in the spirit of fairness, equity and oneness the quota system policy of admission into tertiary institutions was enact for all and sundry to partake in the limit available educational opportunities. The application of this policy has ushered into the system a series of multiplier effects ranging from examination malpractice, poor quality of learning and effectiveness in the world of work injustice to the educationally developed states and psychological damage to these candidates. Therefore, the policy is due for removal in order to restore sanity and quality back to tertiary education in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

1. Admissions into Nigerian Tertiary Institutions should be based on merits.
2. More institutions of learning should be established in order to accommodate the teaming Nigerians seeking for admission into tertiary institutions of learning based on merits.
3. Quota system of admission should be removed out of tertiary education system in order to enable the tertiary education to achieve her aim and objectives of establishment of producing high skill man power to move economy greater heights and compete favourably in the committee of nations.



4. Other levels of learning lower than the tertiary education should carry out their task effectively and efficiently in order to create the enabling playground the competitive admissions based on merits into the tertiary institutions of learning.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Akinpelu, J. A., *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. (1981) London Mcmillam Press. p. 211

<sup>1</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, *National Policy on Education*. Abuja: 2013 p. 25

<sup>1</sup> Ibid

<sup>1</sup> Ibid p. 26

<sup>1</sup> Nwagwu, C. C. University Access and Matriculation Requirement. The Delimma of Nigerian Secondary school leavers. *International Journal of Educational Research*, (2010) 5, 45-51.

<sup>1</sup> Niomu O., Experiment with mass University Education in Post-Civil war in Nigeria, 1070-1979, in *Journal of Nigerian Studies* (1989), 1 (1), pp.1-36

<sup>1</sup> Majasan Increase Access to University/Higher Education in Africa: A Brief Literature Review. *Forum for International Research in Education*. (1998) 4(3), pp. 210-227

<sup>1</sup> Onwaka, C. J. A., History of Nigerian Education: Philosophical and Political Dimentions. Onitcha: Greenlink Publishers.

<sup>1</sup> Ogoke, J. C., Onwuka, C. J. A. & Enemu, P. C., John Rawl's Theory of Justice and the Quota System of Admission in *Nigerian Universities*. In *Nigerian Journal of Educational Philosophy*. (2021), Vol. 32 PP122-126

<sup>1</sup> Odigwe, F. & Swem, T., Ipact of Quota System of Admission on Quality Education in Universities in Cross River State, *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education*, (2016) 9 (4), 325-332

<sup>1</sup> Ogoke, J. C., Onwuka, C. J. A. & Enemu, P. C., Op.Cit.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>Akinpelu, J. A., *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. (1981) London Mcmillam Press. p. 211

<sup>ii</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, *National Policy on Education*. Abuja: 2013 p. 25

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid p. 26

<sup>v</sup> Nwagwu, C. C. University Access and Matriculation Requirement. The Delimma of Nigerian Secondary school leavers. *International Journal of Educational Research*, (2010) 5, 45-51.

<sup>vi</sup> Niomu O., Experiment with mass University Education in Post-Civil war in Nigeria, 1070-1979, in *Journal of Nigerian Studies* (1989), 1 (1), pp.1-36

<sup>vii</sup> Majasan Increase Access to University/Higher Education in Africa: A Brief Literature Review. *Forum for International Research in Education*. (1998) 4(3), pp. 210-227

- <sup>viii</sup> Onwaka, C. J. A., History of Nigerian Education: Philosophical and Political Dimentions. Onitcha: Greenlink Publishers.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ogoke, J. C., Onwuka, C. J. A. & Enemu, P. C., John Rawl's Theory of Justice and the Quota System of Admission in *Nigerian Universities*. In *Nigerian Journal of Educational Philosophy*. (2021), Vol. 32 PP122-126
- <sup>x</sup> Odigwe, F. & Swem, T., Ipact of Quota System of Admission on Quality Education in Universities in Cross River State, *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education*, (2016) 9 (4), 325-332
- <sup>xi</sup> Ogoke, J. C., Onwuka, C. J. A. & Enemu, P. C., Op.Cit