

QUOTA SYSTEM REGIME AND QUALITY OF NIGERIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper examines quota system regime and quality of Nigerian tertiary Education. In Nigeria, there is a perceived gap in education between the North and the South – dating as far back as before Nigerian independence in 1960. This gap has generated a lot of controversies and debates among both the academia and the politicians. In an effort to narrow this gap, the government at various times came up with different policies aimed at addressing this educational disparity. One out of other measures taken by different regimes in government is the introduction of quota system in admission of students into Federal tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The policy of quota system in admission of students into Federal tertiary institutions has been criticized as unjust, discriminatory and detrimental to national development. The authors examined the concepts of quota system, quota system in education, quality education and tertiary education. The paper also attempted an appraisal of quota system regime and quality of Nigerian tertiary education. The quota system, introduced to promote diversity and inclusivity, has been criticized for compromising academic standards and perpetuating inequality. Using a analytic method approach, this paper examines the effects of quota system on student admissions, academic performance, and teacher quality. The authors of this paper noted that the quota system has led to a decline in academic standards. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for a nuanced quota system that balances diversity and meritocracy, addresses systemic inequalities, and promotes transparency and accountability. The research contributes to the ongoing debate on the quota system regime and its implications for quality education in Nigeria, providing insights for policymakers, educators and stakeholders. The paper recommends among other things that allocation of at least 70 percent of admission slots should be on merit, regardless of the state, zone, creed or gender of the students; that recruitment of teaching and non teaching staff must also be strictly based on merit – irrespective of tribe, religion and any politically motivated reasons; and that the use of quota

system in admission of students into tertiary institutions in Nigeria should be reviewed periodically and adjusted to reflect changing demographics and regional development needs.

Keywords: quota system, quota system in education, quality education, tertiary education, Nigeria

Introduction:

The introduction of quota system in Nigerian tertiary education has been a contentious one because of tribal sentiments, biases and perceived abuses. Nigeria is a multicultural, linguistic and religious nation – with about 371 tribes.¹ The plurality and diversity of the entity called Nigeria is the source of its beauty, strength, and sad to say, her weakness also. The beauty and strength are seen in the array of beautiful cultures, enormity of talents, and human and material endowment by nature. The endemic struggle for supremacy, control of political power and natural resources by the various ethnic nationalities that constitute the geographical space called Nigeria is one of its weaknesses.

In the political and economic sectors, there are agitations, hews and cry by some ethnic nationalities, and sometimes, religious groups, against perceived injustices and marginalization against their members. In the education sector, there are also agitations for inclusiveness and equal educational opportunities by members of some ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. These agitations date as far back as the colonial era. According to Nwabufo², quota system became a principle in Nigeria in 1958, essentially, as a response to fears of marginalization and ethnic domination in education and government. Rightly so, the author said, the system was contrived to resolve the atavistic misgivings.

The federal character principle as well was devised - and it became a constitutional provision in 1979 to manage Nigeria's diverse character; so that no section of the country will lord it over others or become overwhelmingly dominant in the public service. It was designed to ensure inclusive and equitable demographic/ethnic representation at all levels of government. It was for socio-political balancing. Olabisi³ pointed out that the major reason for formulating the quota policy is to foster equitable development and unity among the over 300 ethnic nationalities in the country. Regrettably, he lamented that the evidence on ground shows that the system is not only killing the quest for excellence and distinction in some parts of the country, it is making others to wallow in frustration and giving them a sense of dejection⁴.

It was observed that the representation of ethnic groups in federal tertiary institutions and public service was lopsided. This lopsidedness and imbalance culminated in outcry and agitation, leading to creation of a quota for accessing public service in 1958. A quota of 50% was allotted to the North and 25% each to the East and West. The quota system was introduced as an idea before the federal character principle. But it wasn't adhered to, as the University of Ibadan rejected it in favour of merit for admission.⁴

Approximately seven years after Nigerian independence, precisely in May 1967, the then Eastern Nigeria broke away from Nigeria – accusing the rest of Nigerian of deliberate and malicious marginalization. This struggle for the independent state of Biafra led to the brutal and fratricidal civil war between Nigeria and the defunct Biafran 1970. After the thirty

months war, the government in power introduced a policy of reintegration to promote equal representation and inclusiveness in government.⁵ This policy, sadly, was never implemented till date.

According to Okoh et. al,⁶ “by 1979 under General Obasanjo, the Constitution Drafting

Committee could sense a rift between ethnic rivalry and recommended ethnic groups for national stability. The military government, resolute about Nigeria’s unity, especially after a civil war, accepted the federal character principle as an initiative to curb dominance and foster a sense of belonging and balance in Nigeria’s political and administrative setup”.

Section 14(3) of the 1999 constitution as amended, captures the federal character saying:

“The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and to promote national unity and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or any of its agencies.”⁷

Based on the constitution, the purpose of the federal character was to prevent the dominance by any sectional group, be it ethnic, geographic or religious, in the country's political governance. But, the federal character is not the only principle of representation. A quota system also exists, though both terms are often used interchangeably. Here’s a good example to better understand them.

Section 147 [3] of the Nigerian Constitution mandates that the President appoints a minister from each state of the federation to reflect the federal character of Nigeria in appointments to public offices⁸ This section of the law, on the one hand, took care of agitations against marginalization by some parts of the country. On the other hand, the quota system was created to address inequality and provide opportunities for the brightest among groups lacking sufficient representation in places like the civil service, military and admissions into tertiary institutions.

In Nigeria, quota system is a very familiar concept in education sector. It is one out of other educational policies in Nigeria meant to bridge the gap in education between the predominantly Moslem Northern and the Christian predominantly Southern Nigeria. This policy dates back to before Nigeria’s independence. policies the most widely recognized gap and the most politically sensitive talking point in Nigeria is the educational imbalance between the Southern and Northern states of the country, Nduka⁹ observed that the Southern states which had been historically more responsive to Western Christian influences and education have made more educational progress than the predominantly Moslem Northern States, where the Christian influence was to a large extent rejected. The effect of this rejection can be noticeable in the imbalance which is not only reflected in the primary level but also

both secondary and tertiary levels of education. A university is different from other academic institutions because its preoccupation is not only in the diffusion of knowledge but its extension. The university yearns for truth and subjects existing body of knowledge to critical examination and analysis to see if it needs revision. As centre for excellence universities are also expected to set the pace for the large society in the efficient and effective management of human and material resources. The problem of admissions into Nigerian tertiary institutions and the maintenance of adequate standard have been associated with some unpopular policies adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria to address the inadequacy in the number of admission places in the tertiary education system. These unpopular policies include among others the following:

- i. Backwardness factor policy that ensured a certain percentage of admission chances was reserved for the states considered to be educationally disadvantaged or backward.
- ii. Catchment area policy which provided that a certain percentage of admission places must be reserved for the indigenes of the areas in which universities are located.
- iii. Quota system policy provided the allocation of certain percentages of admission places into Nigerian universities based on populations, ethnic consideration and states of origin.
- iv. Discriminatory fees policy provided for lower fees to be paid by the indigenes of the localities where universities are established.

Akani (1996)⁸ posits that the above policies resulted in the reduction of admission standards and this allowed poorly qualified candidates to be admitted into Nigerian tertiary institutions. This is because quota system policy has conferred on the various categories of persons the right of admission whether qualified in the strict sense of it or not. Akani further noted that the quality of tertiary education in Nigeria has consequently been lowered as a result of policies which apparently de-emphasize quality. Oduwaiye¹⁰ warned that much as it is good that the educationally disadvantaged area is being encouraged, it should not be at the detriment of others in a situation where a candidate does not gain access just because of his birth place which is not too good. Enemuo¹¹ argued that the policy encourages social discrimination of one group against the other. The author maintained that the quota system in all its ramifications favours mediocrity over and above quality or excellent performance due to candidate's state of origin, local government area, tribe, nepotism or ethnic or religious background rather than by merit or excellence. Enemuo further pointed out that the application of the quota system to admission of candidates into tertiary institutions deny many fine brains from areas considered as educationally advantaged states opportunity of gaining admission. It is frustrating to candidates from the educationally advanced states when they see their counterparts from educationally disadvantaged states with university matriculation examination scores of 200 out of 400 getting admission into the universities but his/her counterpart from educationally advantaged states with higher scores of 300 out of 400 are not admitted because admissions are based on quota system policy. Thus quota system has conferred undue advantages on some candidates who come from areas that are considered as educationally disadvantaged states. This has created inequality in the provision of tertiary

education to those who are better qualified than those who because of quota system policy were given admission.

Concept of Quota System

The term quota system is widely used in many sectors. Some of these sectors are political, economic and education sectors. From political point of view, Oxford Learners dictionary¹² defined quota system as a policy that limits the number of immigrants from any one country who may officially enter the U.S. each year. This type of quota system is practiced in many countries of the world. This is to ensure that one particular country does not dominate or is not favoured more than others in any given circumstance. In the same vein, the dictionary defined quota system in economic sector as a policy that limits the amount of particular goods that can enter or leave a country. Webster's third New international Dictionary¹³ defines "Quota" as the share or proportion received, granted or necessary to a person as being one of a certain number assigned to 'party' (e.g. an institution with a quoted admission policy).

From a general point of view, Obielumani¹³ defined quota system as any selection method (for employment, school admission, among others) whereby a certain set of percentage of those selected must be of a given ethnic or racial background and/or of a particular sex. Kabir (2021)¹⁴ defined quota system as a selection method (for employment, school admission, among others) that, after reviewing an institution's facilities, allocates certain percentages based on specific qualities, needs or profiles such as ethnicity and state of origin. In this paper, quota system is to be understood as practice of selecting a certain predetermined percentage or number of persons from different groups for the purpose of fair representation or participation in a limited opportunity. Here, the emphasis is on school admission of new students into tertiary institutions in Nigeria based on quota system.

Concept of quota system in Nigerian education system

Admission of candidates into tertiary institutions in Nigeria is based on quota system. Okoh, Ebeigbe and Egwuelu (2018)¹⁵ defined quota system in education system as a represent the number of candidates that should be admitted into the university in one academic year from each state of the federation to remedy imbalance in education between the Northern and the southern part of the country that should be admitted into the university in one academic year from each state. In this paper, quota system in education is to be understood as a practice whereby a number of candidates to be admitted into federal tertiary institutions and federal unity colleges are determined by a policy. Bamisaiye in Okoh, Ebeigbe and Egwuelu (2018)¹⁶ outlined how the quota system is applied in the admission of candidates into the first, second and third generations of the federal tertiary institutions. Accordingly, the authors observed that in the then six first generation Universities of Ibadan, Nigeria, Lagos, Ahmadu Bello, Ife (Obafemi Awolowo University) and Benin, this is how it is applied:

- a. 40% on merit from all the states of the Federation
- b. 30% from the catchment areas
- c. 20% for students from educationally less developed states
- d. 10% for others at the discretion of the university

In the same vein, the authors noted that in the second generation Nigerian Universities of Calabar, Illorin, Jos, Kano, Maiduguri, Port Harcourt and Sokoto, that similar policy prevailed as indicated below:

- a. 30% on merit from all the states of the federation
- b. 30% for students from the catchment area.
- c. 30% for students from educationally disadvantaged areas.
- d. 10% for others at the discretion of the University.

Okoh, Ebeigbe and Egwuelu¹⁷ outlined how quota system is applied in the third generation Universities in Nigeria and the Federal Universities of Technology as follows:

- a. 20% from the catchment areas
- b. 80% at the discretion of the University.

Obviously, when one considers the quota system policy applied in admission of students into the third generation universities and the Federal Universities of Technology in Nigeria, admissions based on merit is not given a pride of place among other criteria. Unarguably, educational system that is not based on merit cannot but compromise quality and excellence. Tertiary education should be for best brains and not education for all. If primary and secondary education is made basic education for all Nigerian school age, it should not be so for tertiary education. Tertiary education should be exclusively for those who are outstanding in intellectual endowment and who have demonstrated special interest in scientific research and proffering solutions to the numerous problems threatening our national development and growth. Quota system has thus been so much politicized to the extent that education is seen as a national cake which every section of Nigeria must have her own share – whether qualified or unqualified. This frame of mind and approach to tertiary education leading to the introduction of quota system in admission of students into tertiary institutions in Nigeria is wrongly applied to narrow the educational gap between the various ethnic nationalities that make up the entity called Nigeria. Education is an essential sector of our national development and therefore should not be politicized.

Meaning of Quality Education

Education is a process of transmitting knowledge to a learner. UNESCO (no date)¹⁸ defined education as the process of facilitating learning or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits. According to Wong (2022)¹⁹, education is an essential building block of our society because it provides knowledge, skills and an environment to help people grow — and in turn, they will help society grow. No nation can develop above the standard of education it gives to her citizen. The United Nations (no date)²⁰ understand the supremacy of education for a brighter and prosperous future and is therefore of the consensus that quality education and, not merely education should be a reality for all. In its Sustainable Development Goals, the UN has identified quality education as a major goal to ensure the ‘transformation of the world’ by 2030. By quality education, the UN implies equitable and standard education for all that will promote lifelong learning and the urge to gather knowledge. Inclusivity and equity are the foundations to be upheld in quality education

and not a greater literacy rate. This is a revolutionary approach to understanding education and making it the means of changing the world. Quality education specifically entails issues such as appropriate skills development, gender parity, provision of relevant school infrastructure, equipment, educational materials and resources, scholarships or teaching force²¹.

Concept of Tertiary Education

In Nigeria, education system is divided into three stages. These stages are primary, secondary and tertiary education. This paper focuses on tertiary education. According to the World Bank (no date)²² tertiary education refers to all formal post-secondary education, including public and private universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools. Federal Republic of Nigeria(FRN, 2014)²³ defined tertiary education as “the education given after Post Basic Education in institutions such as Universities, and Inter-University Centres such as the

Nigeria French Language Village, Nigeria Arabic Language, National Institute of Nigerian Languages, institutions such as Innovation Enterprise Institutions (IEIs), and Colleges Of Education, Monotechnics, Polytechnics, and other specialized institutions such as Colleges of Agriculture, Schools of Health and Technology and the National Teachers’ Institutes (NTI)”.

The goals of tertiary education according to Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN 2013)²⁴ include among other things to:

- i. Contribute to national development through high level relevant Manpower training;
- ii. Develop and inculcating proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- iii. Develop the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- iv. Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self reliant and useful members of the society,
- v. Promote and encouraging scholarship and community service.
- vi. Forge and cementing national unity; and
- vii. Promote national and international understanding and interaction (P.39)

Quota system regime and quality of Nigerian tertiary education: a critical appraisal

The Nigerian quota system in education has been a matter of discussion among intellectuals and political class. Some argue in favour of quota system while some argue against it. Arguing in favour of quota system, Nwabufo (2021)²⁵ remarked that quota system in Nigeria was conceived to address an inequitable system, but the prevailing "unjust system" betrayed the purpose for which the quota system was ideated and actioned. The application of quota system policy in admission of students into tertiary institutions has negative consequences on the quality of Nigerian tertiary education, and by extension, the Nigerian society at large. Despite its prima facie benefits such as creating inclusive policy that takes care of

educationally disadvantaged zones in tertiary education, giving them a higher percentage consideration in admission could be likened to robbing Peter to pay Paul. Olabisi²⁶ observed that quota system as practiced in Nigeria is a corrupt version of it. According to the author, Nigeria operates a quota policy that robs Peter to pay Paul, thus enthroning mediocrity above meritocracy. For instance, he observed that in university admission, 45 per cent of candidates are admitted based on merit, 35 per cent based on catchment area while 20 per cent of the space goes to educationally less developed states. In other words, only 45 per cent of slots in public universities are merit-based in the true sense of the word. Other considerations apart from merit determine those that get the remaining 55 per cent slots.²⁷ One of the effects of this absurdity, the author argues, is the continuous sufferings in the land in spite of its rich human and capital resources, to the extent that the country is now named the world's poverty capital.

Tertiary education should be a place where the best brains in the country are harnessed and trained so that after their studies in the tertiary institution they occupy and control the most sensitive part sectors such as politics, economy and education. Arguing against quota system regime in Nigeria education sector, Okoh, Ebeigbe and Egwuelu²⁸ condemned the practice noting that tertiary education is not a place for basic education where everyone is expected to go. It is a place for specialties. Therefore common sense dictates that whoever thinks of going to the University must demonstrate ability and competence in order to be there. If quota system can be tolerated anywhere, it is not in the University where research and excellence are emphasized.

Again, quota system can be linked to the prevailing acute and widespread fallen standard of education in Nigeria. Today, for example, some students in tertiary institutions can neither make a simple correct sentence in English Language nor defend their status as undergraduates. The situation is even worse than that. Quota system is responsible for the unprecedented shortfall in the quality of the expected outcome of tertiary education in Nigeria. This is because many of those who in the strict sense of it are not eligible to be admitted into tertiary institutions have flooded tertiary institutions. No thanks to admission into tertiary institutions based on quota system.

Due to the compromised admission policy based on quota system tertiary education has suddenly and sadly become a glorified secondary education. The compromised policy of admission into tertiary institutions has drastically reduced lowered the quality of education.

The use of quota system in admission of new students into tertiary institutions violates the goals of tertiary education which states that tertiary educational institutions shall pursue the goals of tertiary education through, among other ways, quality student intake²⁹. There are case where many first class brains are denied admission in tertiary institutions on account of quota system. Take for example, Bolaji³⁰ observed that the admission guidelines for 2021 wherein, the admission board said "45% of candidates should be admitted into federal institutions based on merit, 35% on catchment basis and 20% from states that are less developed where education is concerned".³¹

There are still other bottleneck bureaucracies inhibiting brilliant Nigerian students from gaining admission in tertiary institutions based on quota system. The Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 2021 said that admissions by the state institutions based on merit quota should be in two layers:

- National Merit Quota – for the first topmost 10% (indigenes and non-indigenes including foreigners); and
- Indigene – Merit Quota – additional 35% allotted to indigenes of the state on merit basis after the first topmost 10% National Merit.³² Corroborating this ugly situation, Prof. Ekuh Abdullahi, former chairman of the admissions committee at the University of Ilorin in Kwara State, confirmed that many qualified candidates are not admitted on account of the quota system. He recalled how a parent whose child scored 340 in the UTME and 70 (out of 100) in the post-UTME test dragged the university before the national assembly for not admitting his son to study medicine which he applied for, despite meeting the requirements.³³ He further noted that the university, in order to distance itself from any foul play during the admission process, submitted their admission list to the national assembly, and they found that there were 40 slots for merit based on quota system formula. Many candidates, including the boy in question, performed excellently. But because he came 41st in the performance ranking and he is not from the catchment area he was not admitted.³⁴

Conclusion

Quota system regime is an enemy of progress in Nigeria – for no nation can develop beyond the education level of her citizens. Quota system is a discriminatory policy against first class brains in Nigeria. It stands against the policy of equal educational opportunities for all Nigerians as contained in the National Policy on Education. Quota system is like robbing Peter to pay Paul, celebrating, rewarding and enthroning mediocrity over excellent. It is also a tyrannical policy that favours the less educationally developed states against a more educationally developed states. If Nigeria must develop and compete with other fast developing countries of the world, it must abrogate quota system in her education sector. Tertiary education should be competitive and for the best brains. If this is not done, many bright students who have potentials of becoming internationally acclaimed intellectual giants kept out of the equation.

Recommendations

To address the abuse of the quota system in admission of fresh students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the authors of this paper recommend the following:

1. Nigerian tertiary education should be upgraded to the rank of education given in internationally acclaimed and sought-for universities
2. Allocation of at least 70 percent of admission slots to meritorious students, regardless of their state, zone, creed or gender. By so doing, best brains in Nigeria would be given a chance to develop optimally.

3. In line with the above policy of admission of students strictly based on merit, recruitment of teaching and non teaching staff must also be strictly based on merit – irrespective of tribe, religion and any politically motivated reasons.
4. The Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) should publish admission guidelines, criteria, and processes online for accountability.
5. The use of quota system in admission of students into tertiary institutions in Nigeria should be reviewed periodically and adjusted to reflect changing demographics and regional development needs.
6. The ministry of education, through the legislative arm of the government, should grant tertiary institutions more autonomy to determine their admission policies and criteria.
7. Again, the Federal Ministry of Education should establish a committee to monitor and evaluate admission processes, identifying and addressing abuses.
8. The Federal Ministry of Education should conduct regular audits to ensure compliance with admission policies and guidelines.
9. The Federal Ministry of Education should establish clear consequences for institutions or individuals found abusing the quota system.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can minimize the abuse of the quota system, promoting fairness, transparency, and merit-based admissions in tertiary institutions.

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