



FEATURE

The Road Less Travelled in Access to Higher Education

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Synopsis

This feature identifies the licencing examinations professional bodies conduct as a road less travelled in access to higher education. Such examinations enable successful candidates to gain Professional Diplomas which are equivalents of university Bachelor's degrees and can grant the holders access to postgraduate academic programmes. The feature which is based on a doctoral research study conducted in Nigeria argues that the elastic capacity of professional bodies for access to higher education may be a cost effective platform for dealing with the higher education access challenge in the case country and many other societies with similar challenges.

Key words: Higher Education Access; University Admission; Equity and Inclusiveness; Professional Bodies; Professional Examinations

Introduction

The demand for higher education is generally high in most countries in the world and even more so in countries where employment practices place a high premium on higher education credentials. Higher education aspirants seem to find an irresistible push towards higher education by the direct and indirect messages from parents and other stakeholders which suggest that failure to secure higher education credentials would result in life-long struggle with poverty and life of insignificance. A flip side of such messages is that higher education credentials hold the key to good life and should be considered indispensable for membership of a twenty first century society where knowledge drives everything (Brown et al., 2011). Even governments perceive adequate access to higher education as a competitive tool that can help them guarantee economic success and therefore demonstrate commitment to making it accessible (Osborne, 2013).

As Rassool has observed, most countries seem to underperform in terms of provision of adequate resources for the running of educational institutions (Rassool, 2007). This under-resourcing of education which has funding, manpower, and infrastructure dimensions seem to have significant telling effects on access to higher education in countries such as Nigeria (FederalMinistryofEducation, 2005). In pursuit of equity and fairness, some stakeholders

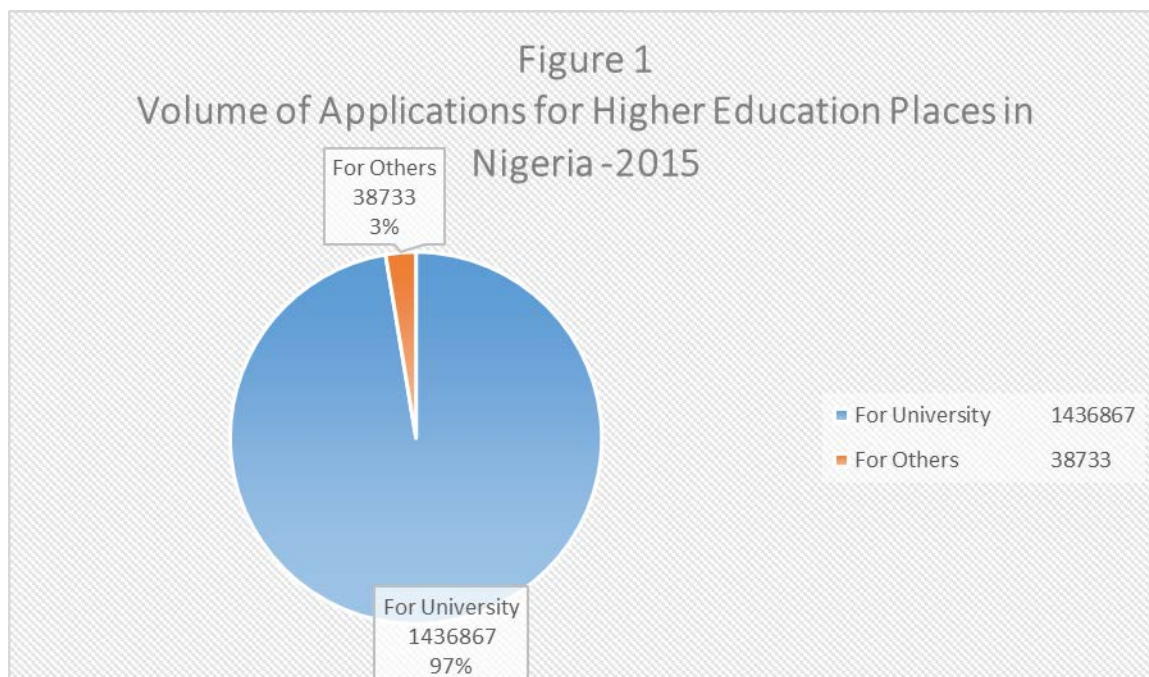
worry about how to distribute available higher education places in a way that provides a level playing ground to all aspirants (Ikpefan, 2016). Young people with favourable cultural capital seem to always win in the battle for limited opportunities (Gladwell, 2008). The race for higher education places seems to be one of the arenas where this manifests. The deliberate choices elite parents make for their children seem to enable such children win in these battles for higher education places (Calhoun et al., 1993, Gladwell, 2008). As this study revealed, the young people who win in this competition for higher education places are in the minority in the case of Nigeria.

We may never be able to establish the full consequences of the inherent inequities and injustice associated with this lack of opportunities for many young people to fulfil their legitimate aspirations to gain higher education credentials. What we can tell is that a large army of young people who are not in education, training or employment may spell trouble for society both socially and economically. The huge security challenge that appears to be threatening Nigeria's social harmony and economic advancement (UNDP, 2016) may not be unconnected with this situation. Empirical evidence indicates that the limited opportunities young people have for access to higher education may promote education corruption such as bribery (Willot, 2011). Access to higher education may enable individuals to improve their human capital, which is an advantage that can procure both financial and non-financial benefits including better health, and long life expectancy not only for the direct beneficiaries but also for their children who tend to do better than their less fortunate peers (Fuente and Ciccone, 2003). Democratizing access to higher education may therefore be a good thing for society.

To let more people into higher education, stakeholders may do well to consider trading new paths that are indeed old. One of such pathways is the opportunity that professional bodies provide for higher education in Nigeria which this author has researched into and has results that show that such bodies have elastic capacities that help Nigeria and maybe, other countries to resolve higher education access problems.

The study context

Nigeria currently has a population of about 185 million people with a high population growth rate that makes it add about 5 million people to its population annually. Most secondary school graduates in the country have the aspiration to benefit from higher education which, as a result of environmental influences, they interpret to mean university education. As this study revealed, of the 445 higher educational institutions in the country, only 143 of them are universities which as Figure 1 illustrates are currently the preferred destinations for 97% of higher education aspirants in the country.



Source: Adapted from Fatunmole (2015:2)

The other pathways to higher education which include polytechnics offering National Diplomas (ND) and Higher National Diplomas (HND) and Colleges of Education offering National Certificate of Education (NCE), the minimum academic credential prescribed by the country's education policy for individuals wishing to be primary school teachers. It takes a minimum of three years of full time study in the university for an NCE holder to earn a Bachelor's degree in Education. Most aspirants to higher education in Nigeria may consider this length of time to be too long and cost intensive hence their insistence on direct university education. A similar argument can be advanced to explain their dislike for polytechnic programmes which require a minimum of four years of full time study and one year of compulsory internship for those who opt for such programmes to earn HND. Some of the stakeholders in Nigeria's education industry who granted this researcher interview also observed that employment practices in the country which discriminate against non-university degree holders is also one of the major factors pushing young people in the direction of universities.

The data in Table 1 reflects the rejection rate of applications for university places in Nigeria.

Table 1 Demand and supply of undergraduate spaces at a sample university in Nigeria 2004 – 2014

S/N	YEAR	TOTAL NUMBER OF APPLICANTS	NUMBER OF THOSE ADMITTED	% Admitted
1	2014	66,247	8,601	12.98

2	2013	37,469	6,258	16.70
3	2012	87,887	7,665	8.72
4	2011	99,195	8,223	8.28
5	2010	78,091	7,853	10.05
6	2009	63,698	7,156	11.23
7	2008	57,492	5,769	10.03
8	2007	54,878	5,532	10.08
9	2006	53,592	5,538	10.33
10	2005	53,820	5,529	10.27
11	2004	52,864	5,516	10.43

Admissions- Range: 8.28% (in 2011) - 16.70% (in 2013) Average: 10.82%

Source: Researcher's Analysis of data supplied by a sample university, 2015

This suggests that most applicants for university places in Nigeria are chasing a mirage. The data collected by this researcher indicates that the number of applicants who aspire to get into the Nigerian university system for undergraduate studies annually but get turned down is more than one million. The situation may get worse in the years to come given that about two million young people graduate from secondary schools in the country annually.

Most of the universities currently in existence in the country are grappling with funding and manpower challenges and are unlikely to be in a position to absorb more candidates in the near future. The current economic challenges of the country which are largely associated with its dwindling crude oil revenues are pointers to this. The private universities in the country are not exempt from those challenges and seem to lack the capacity to be of significant help. Most parents in the country also lack the means to fund private university education for their children. The existence of private universities in the country appears to have also limited the public space for young people from diverse backgrounds to interact and forge a common vision for the country which is one of the most unequal societies in the world (UNDP, 2015) and currently burdened by difficult security and other development challenges (UNDP, 2016). The easy access to higher education which private universities seem to give young people from economically advantaged backgrounds, leaving children of the poor largely unattended to may be erecting more barriers against social mobility in the country. This may raise issues of equity and justice and fuel class suspicions and tensions which may not augur well for the country's socio-economic and political development. The pertinent question one may ask is: why are most of the higher education aspirants in the country insisting on direct admission into universities in the country when there are alternative routes that can provide them the desired access?

The Road Less Travelled

Professional bodies in Nigeria through the professional examinations they conduct provide an alternative route to higher education. Polytechnics and Colleges of Education which focus on technological and teacher education respectively also provide alternative routes to higher education. They are all poorly patronized. This researcher who employed mixed methods of investigation which included questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions discovered that whereas Polytechnics and Colleges of Education are unpopular among applicants because of their perceived inferior status as higher education providers, the poor patronage of professional bodies is largely traceable to the limited awareness of the access opportunity they offer. All the stakeholders who provided this researcher data including the higher education aspirants themselves and their school counsellors indicated that students tend to finish secondary school without a good understanding of how professional bodies can facilitate their access to higher education.

The data collected by this researcher indicate that the professional diplomas awarded by professional bodies in the country are rated as equivalents of first degrees awarded by universities and can be used for admission into postgraduate programmes. The practice licences which they confer on the awardees are generally, prerequisites for professional practice in the country. The level of professional competence such diplomas provide the awardees is also believed by stakeholders to be significantly higher than what people receive from the country's university system.

Self-motivated and diligent candidates for such examinations may complete their programmes faster than the conventional university route can permit. Professional bodies have elastic capacities to absorb higher education aspirants since they are open institutions that do not require their students to study for their examinations within the four walls of schools. As many candidates as meet the minimum requirement for admission which for most of them is secondary school certificate are admitted for the programmes and get awarded their diplomas when they pass all the stages of the examinations. Candidates move at their own pace and study in line with their peculiar circumstances. This is an indication that the system they provide can cater adequately for students of diverse backgrounds including recent graduates from secondary schools and adult learners such as carers and mothers returning to school after childbirth.

The school counsellors who granted this researcher interviews confessed that they were not well informed on the opportunities professional bodies in the country provide for higher education. They therefore did not include information on them in their career advice to higher education aspirants in their schools. The professional bodies were discovered to have also failed to promote the opportunities they offer for higher education to higher education aspirants in secondary schools. This research revealed that most of the candidates for their examinations are either undergraduates in tertiary institutions or those who have already

graduated from such institutions. Given this situation, many of the stakeholders perceive professional examinations as postgraduate endeavours or examinations only individuals with tertiary education exposure can pass successfully.

Much of this perception problem is traceable to the arrangements most of the professional bodies studied by this researcher have with tertiary institutions which enables interested students in such institutions to graduate with professional certifications. This perception problem is an unintended consequence of such arrangements as this study's data revealed. How can this spare capacity available with professional bodies be made to help the large number of young people in Nigeria and perhaps in other countries who are not looking beyond universities for access to higher education?

The Way Forward

People cannot patronize what they do not know exists. Innovations that diffuse speedily are usually those that are easily understood by the intended users and introduced through credible sources and channels that are compatible with the communication preferences of such people (Rogers, 2003). Young people around the world today use the new media more than the traditional media for diverse purposes including information gathering and entertainment (Fill, 2013). This study found this to be true with the higher education aspirants from four secondary schools in Nigeria who participated in the study. In spite of their diversity in terms of economic and social class and whether or not they are in private or public secondary schools, they were found to use internet platforms as their primary media for information gathering. This would suggest that this opportunity can be promoted to them successfully using such platforms. This opportunity that professional bodies provide should be simplified for their understanding and appropriate channels and sources employed to get the information to them.

It is particularly important that they are helped to understand how unrealistic it may be for them to insist on direct university admission after secondary school. The communication strategy must be well articulated and deployed if the required behaviour change is to occur. It is not in human nature to switch to new routes without resistance even when the switch will potentially result in phenomenal benefits (Peck, 1990). The first set of people that need to change if success is to be recorded quickly on this may be the public education policy makers. They need to wear a new lens if they are to find the pathways that can democratise access to higher education in the country. They currently seem to have a tunnel vision on this subject which may be why they worry more about how to distribute the very limited higher education places in the country through a selection system stakeholders can trust. A new lens will enable them to see the professional examination route to higher education which is currently one of the roads less travelled in the youths' search for higher education in Nigeria and most probably, other countries around the world.

This route may give more people access to higher education at a cost their families and countries can afford and offer some of them the speed and flexibility they may not find with the conventional route. Its pervasive adoption may also help to produce professionals with the kind of skills employers are asking for from those who seek the jobs they offer. Professional examinations might be discovered to be a potent stone that can kill many birds.

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