

THE ROLE OF ADMISSION, INSTRUCTION AND EXAMINATION PROCESSING ON NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY DEGREES

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Introduction

In the first and second republics, the Nigerian university degree had depth and quality and was so acknowledged all over the world. During those periods, admission was strictly on merit, courses of instruction were detailed and thorough, examinations were inviolable and the degree award system was sacrosanct. The entrants into university were intellectually endowed. The end products - the graduates - were top rate.

In those days, students lived well on and off campus. Hostel accommodations were neat, spacious and lively. Electrical power and water supply were regular. The total environment was friendly and conducive to learning.

Academic staff of the period were highly qualified and experienced. They were properly motivated and had little or no distractions from the larger Nigerian society that could compromise the quality of their services.

Since the end of the second republic, however, things changed dramatically for the worse. Admission soon became proliferated just as merit became secondary and the quality of applicants badly diminished. Teaching facilities and living conditions deteriorated. Staff morale dropped sharply and quality of instruction suffered giving rise to graduates of low quality.

This paper looks at the roles of the admission, instruction and examination processes in the desecration of academic standards in Nigerian universities. Some suggestions are made on how to redress the situation.

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ADMISSION

More than 80% of today's intakes into University degree programmes apply through the university matriculation examinations conducted by the Joint Admissions Matriculation Board. The rest qualify for admission with passes in A-level examinations or possession of National diplomas at prescribed credit levels. This practice contrasts with the old system in which only a few truly exceptional candidates were admitted via selection examinations conducted by the individual universities and the larger majority had higher school certificates or Advanced Level General Certificates of Examination.

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Whereas the old admission system combined the best of the A-level candidates with the smartest of the school certificate holders, the current situation is almost the reverse. The good students who perform creditably well at school in the Continuous Assessment processes and excel in the School Certificate examinations often get low scores in the University Matriculation examination. On the other hand, except in a few cases, the dull and the less than average candidates score very high marks in the JAMB examinations. When admitted, a large number of this latter category of candidates often have to combine two different school certificate results to qualify for registration in the universities.

Clearly, something is drastically wrong with the JAMB scores as they often do not reflect the capability of the candidates. Records in our various universities show that there is very little correlation (if any at all) between the students' JAMB scores at entry and their performances on the courses. Except in a few cases, the bright JAMB entrants often turn out to be dull university students. A study which is nearing completion in the University of Lagos is already confirming that high JAMB scorers are more prone to examination malpractices than the average scorers. This, therefore, calls to question the JAMB examination processing methods and the acceptability of JAMB results for admission into the universities.

Some of the anomalies in examination processing that often give rise to

unrealistic JAMB results are

- (a) the perennial practice of extending closing dates for procurement and submission of application forms and the use of special centres
- (b) the widespread malpractices at examination centres and probably in the collation process.
- (c) the dastardly role of coaching centre operators who purchase application forms in bulk, present their candidates in designated centres and perpetrate all manners of examination malpractices.
- (d) the regular leakages of examination questions during transportation from JAMB offices to the examination centres.
- (e) the collaboration of examination invigilators and supervisors with individuals engaged in widespread malpractices at examination centres.

Unfortunately the clamour of various stakeholders over the years that something drastic be done to improve the credibility of JAMB examination results have not been heeded partly because of political considerations and partly because of the heavy public relations activities of the board. Consequently, the situation has worsened from year to year.

The on-going admission exercise is a good example of a process that is bound to give admission to large number of underserving candidates. The JAMB scores have been abnormally high with a great deal of bunching at the high scores. Some of the high scorers with more than 275 marks have already come round to appeal that they be allowed to defer their admissions for a year to enable them satisfy conditions for registration. Meanwhile, many candidates with JAMB scores of between 211 and 232 who have passed the WASC and NECO examinations in truly flying colours have been begging in vain for admission even into the most unpopular of our undergraduate programmes. This kind of situation is absolutely absurd and should be arrested forthwith if the quality of our university graduates must be improved.

Three options have been canvassed. The first is to scrap JAMB and let universities conduct their own examinations as they did before the creation of JAMB. The second is to cure the many shortcomings in the JAMB examination processes and admit students on the bases of JAMB scores and performance in the West African School Certificate examinations. The third option is to re-introduce the Higher School Certificate programme and admit on the bases of HSC or the GCE A/Level. A few exceptional candidates, not more than 5% of total intake, may then be admitted through selection examinations conducted by the individual universities.

Option *ONE* suffers from problems of multiple admissions and the likelihood of not promoting national unity. Option *THREE* appears to me to be the one option most likely to halt the decline in graduate quality as applicants would have been thoroughly screened by the higher examination. Option Two is a compromise option which is bound nevertheless to produce better quality graduates than we currently have.

Students

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There are two categories of university students. The first are the bona-fide full-time students who satisfy all requirements for admission and registration. These attend lectures regularly and punctually carry out laboratory assignments and take all prescribed examinations. Their academic performance obeys the normal distribution curve whereby a large majority are of average and acceptable competence, a few are poor and a few are top rate .

The second category are the occasional students. These are ordinarily unsuitable candidates who by foul or crook means gain admission into the universities. Many of them have jobs and businesses outside the university. They live big and seek to acquire the degree of their choice by paying for them. These students seldom attend lectures or tutorials and get their classmates to sign the attendance registers on their behalf to qualify to write examinations in the courses. They copy answers to homeworks and laboratory assignments from the full-time students. They sustain their studentship by cheating through the system in various ways which may include stealing of

examination questions, recruitment of bright students or ex-students to write examinations for them, collaboration with unscrupulous staff to alter examination grades for a consideration and so on and so forth! When these students complete their programmes, they would be half-baked as they have learnt little or nothing and acquired no meaningful knowledge of the courses they have been through.

Aside of these, it will be wishful thinking to expect today's university students to excel in their studies in the face of the many daunting problems confronting them. Libraries are inadequate for any meaningful intellectual activities in terms of relevance, currency, quality and quantity of books and periodicals available. The laboratories and workshops of science and science-based programmes are either ill-equipped or not equipped at all. The result is that the many experiments and hands-on practicals that are required for a proper understanding of the subjects are poorly handled or totally skipped.

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In the few cases where laboratory practicals are done, only a few of the students carry out the actual experimentation while the others copy the results. In many first and second generation universities, laboratory equipment are completely obsolete and incompatible with facilities in well-stocked laboratories elsewhere in the world. In the twenty first century University of Lagos for instance, most equipment in the engineering laboratories are nearly forty years old. They use dial gauges for measurements and are calibrated in the foot-pound-second (FPS) system!. Measurements on these facilities cannot be reproduced. At LASU, engineering students do little or no practicals at all!

The deterioration in social amenities also play a part in the diminution of standards in the university system. Students' hostels are overcrowded, dirty and uncomfortable. Power and water supplies are erratic and the school environment is unfriendly and sometimes offensive. Internal transportation is a hassle, and security is largely unassured. These conditions are clearly not conducive to learning and cannot, therefore, be expected to produce good quality graduates.

It may be argued that the hostel living environment is the creation of the students themselves. Many of them have not known any better living conditions and would do

anything to stop the universities from increasing accommodation fees and improving facilities. A bed space in a typical Nigerian university hostel costs N90.00 when in reality it should cost no less than N500.00 per month or N2,000.00 per semester. It is trite argument that very few students have this kind of money to pay. The hostel fees should be raised to a reasonable level that will guarantee better living conditions in the hostels.

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Educational Policy

The 6-3-3-4 educational policy provided for four tiers in the educational sector. These are the primary, the junior secondary school (JSS), the senior secondary school (SSS) and the tertiary. It was expected, therefore, that some pupils would leave school after the junior secondary school while a large number will stop after the senior secondary school. Those good enough would proceed to the tertiary institutions to form the bulk of the high level manpower needed to run the nation.

Unfortunately, the 6-3-3-4 policy has failed completely to achieve its objectives. Almost every primary school leaver has proceeded to secondary school. The JSS has failed to be the terminal point for any pupil too as literally everyone has proceeded to senior secondary school. And inspite of the paucity of spaces in universities and other tertiary institutions every SSCE holder now aspires to proceed to university. In itself, this is not a bad thing. The question, however, is whether every school certificate holder is suitable for university education or not. The answer, of course, is obvious. Many simply do not have the ability to benefit from university education! Unfortunately, the JAMB admission policy in the last 15 years has allowed a large number of less suitable candidates to be admitted at the expense of very good ones. To improve quality of university graduates, this trend should be reversed.

The Academic Calendar

The academic calendar is an important variable in the determination of the quality of a university degree. Normally a period of seventeen weeks is prescribed for registration, teaching and examination in a normal semester. In the past ten years or so, very few universities complied with this provision. Vice-chancellors, who do not quite believe in the sanctity of the university calendars, allow examinations to commence anytime after ten weeks of lectures particularly after a students' unrest. During such crises, students are often recalled at whatever point in time in the semester to take examinations and proceed immediately after on holidays.

Government subventions to universities also play an inadvertent role in regular abortion of the university calendar. The current funding system allows subventions to universities to lapse whenever a given session is skipped for whatever reason. This compels university administrators to seek to do in a few weeks what ought to be accomplished in months. This consideration and an insatiable political desire to be seen to have normalised the university calendar while other universities have failed made the 1995/2000 administrators of the university of Lagos run shorter semesters during the period. The effect, of course, inevitably showed in the diminished quality of the products of the period.

Quality Control

The poor quality of graduates from the Nigerian university system may, in part, be blamed on the ineffectiveness of the quality control mechanisms in the system. The NUC has a set of minimum standards for the academic programmes in the universities. Professional registration councils e.g. COREN also have minimum professional standards the programmes must attain to be accredited.

Unfortunately, the benefits that should accrue to the degree programmes from the enforcement of such minimum standards have not either because of ineffective inspection or because appropriate actions are seldom taken on the reports to cure the deficiencies identified in the programmes.

Sometimes the composition of NUC accreditation teams are inappropriate as they are hardly based on merit. The impression is unwittingly created that the NUC does not take into consideration the history and status of the programmes to be accredited in setting up the teams to accredit them. Consequently, low-powered teams, which may be easily intimidated by the sheer relative status of the staff of the departments they are to accredit are sent. The accreditation reports, in the circumstance, hardly ever reflects the true situation on the ground and the programmes are accredited on the basis of these erroneous reports.

Even presidential visitation panels, designed to monitor university performance, do not fair better as very few of them ever achieve the objectives for which they are set up. Some serve deliberately to witchhunt perceived trouble-makers or political foes as in the case of the Balonwu visitation panel of the second republic which sacked seven prolific professors who sought to uphold the ideals of the university. Others are contrived to cover-up mis-deeds as in the case of the recent Nwana Visitation panel which praised the University of Lagos management for setting up an illegal money-spinning private business, in the name of the university, in far-away Korea.

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Staffing

The staffing situation in most universities is lopsided. Whereas a 4:1 academic/administrative staff ratio is specified by the NUC, the reverse is largely the case in many universities. The result is that large sums of money, which ought to be used for teaching and research activities are expended on administrative overheads.

The brain drain of the last 15 years drastically depleted the ranks of the academic staff of the universities. This gave rise to extremely high students/staff ratios, which in some universities, has persisted till this day. Meanwhile, the poor rate of pay in the face of high costs of living lowered the morale of those who stayed on and compelled an inevitable search for extra work outside the university to make ends meet. This results in serious decline in the quality of instruction and examination in the universities.

Conclusion

It may be concluded from the foregoing submissions that the current low quality of the Nigerian university degree is due largely to

- (a) the many flaws in the JAMB admission processes
- (b) the low quality and the lack of commitment to learning, of the students admitted
- (c) the poor state of infrastructural facilities e.g. hostels, power supply, water supply and transport, in the universities
- (d) the obsolescence and inadequacy of teaching, laboratory, library and research facilities.
- (e) the unrealistic funding policies of the proprietors
- (f) the lop-sided staffing situation in the universities, and
- (g) the poor implementation of the quality control processes

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Recommendations

1. There is no doubt that the 6-3-3-4 educational policy has not worked. It should be formally scrapped. The old 6-5-2-4 system (primary, secondary, high school, tertiary) should be re-introduced.
2. Admission into the universities could continue to be coordinated by JAMB. However, such admissions should be mainly based on GCE A/L or HSC results if recommendation I above is accepted. Otherwise admission should henceforth be based on the overall performance of a candidate in both JAMB and the West African School Certificate Examination
3. Large student populations which out-strip available classroom and laboratory facilities should be discouraged.
4. Admission of workers and businessmen into full-time academic programmes should be prohibited
5. Examination regulations particularly those which prescribe minimum attendance to qualify to take examinations should henceforth be rigidly enforced.

6. Obsolete laboratory and workshop facilities in the older universities should be replaced. Serviceable ones should be repaired
7. The standard of living in campus accommodation should be drastically improved. More hostels should be built and reasonable accommodation fees should be charged to facilitate the realization of the proposed better living environment.
8. Local, state and federal governments should commit reasonable financial resources to university education.

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