
University access and ‘comparative disadvantage’ in Nigeria: a reflection on the criticality of equity for sustainable development

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Abstract: Notwithstanding the revamped attention to equity in higher education the world over, it is pertinent to realistically address several foundational issues if equitable access to higher education for sustainable development is indeed envisaged. What is the understanding of ‘equal’ in the context of everyday African society and how has this affected access policy implementation? What roles have existing higher education access practices played in achieving the inclusion of marginalised groups? Could policy definitions of ‘disadvantage’, ‘under-representation’ and ‘vulnerability’ have been misplaced, flawed, or outdated? What should new equity reforms be targeted at, or more problematic, how should they be targeted? These profound questions provoke the thinking in this paper using the lingering crisis of university admission in Nigeria as a case study within the context of the United Nations’ sustainable development goals (SDGs). The paper critically reflects on the country’s ‘merit-driven’ application system and ambiguous quota admissions policy to illustrate the possibility of persistent exclusion and heightened inequalities should the status quo remain. It ultimately calls for the need to contextually rethink equity policies and practices towards the achievement of the SDGs.

Keywords: Nigeria; higher education; access; equity; sustainable development goals; SDGs.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Agbaire, J.J. (2018) ‘University access and ‘comparative disadvantage’ in Nigeria: a reflection on the criticality of equity for sustainable development’, *Int. J. Higher Education and Sustainability*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp.64–79.

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This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled 'Understanding access disadvantage in Nigeria's university education: a reflection on the criticality of equity for sustainable development' presented at International Conference on Education Research and Development in Africa (ICERDA), Accra, Ghana, 3–5 October 2016.

1 Introduction – conceptualising diversity, equality and equity in higher education

The need to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and reduce social inequalities is a prominent feature of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) declared by the United Nations in 2015. Indeed, goal four of the SDGs is a statement of the intention to ensure that everyone has equal access to affordable and quality education, including university, by 2030. Addressing gender equality, goal five additionally emphasises the plan to eliminate all forms of discrimination against females everywhere. Further to this and specifically addressing socio-economic and socio-political inequalities, goal ten elucidates the aim to ensure equal opportunity by, among other things, replacing discriminatory laws, policies and practices with more appropriate ones (United Nations, 2015). This quest for equity is apparently driven by the established existence of diversity and the recognition of persistent and multiple forms of inequalities in societies all over the world. However, it is important to consider that what constitutes diversity particularly with reference to higher education participation appears to be dependent on specific contextual features and histories; on the major factors that drive inequality in these contexts and/or the extent to which they do. Whereas issues of diversity arise mostly from questions of racial discrimination in US and South Africa for example, they are more often a question of class differences in the British society. Similarly, while Sweden does not seem to have gross issues of gender inequality in education, this is a pressing issue for many countries in the African continent. Additionally, diversity in every context can be conceived on two distinct levels – institutional (for example, school types/status or hierarchies) and individual (identities/social characteristics) – with both often interlinking and impacting on (in)equality (David, 2007; Archer, 2007; Metcalfe, 2009), thus making equitable participation in higher education even more problematic to define or attain. Noteworthy is that these different positioning and understandings of diversity both within and among national contexts suggest varying implications for how equity will be addressed and the potential defect in making generalisations across contexts.

Linking equity in higher education with the efforts to promote equality among diverse groups, equitable access is widely and basically seen as involving the provision of equal opportunity for all who desire it to get admitted to educational institutions irrespective of who they are or where they come from. Quite often, the terms 'equality' and 'equity' are used interchangeably but they are not exactly synonymous concepts. Whereas equality invokes the straightforward idea of quantifiable sameness (for example, of the ratio of marginalised group members to advantaged group members represented in higher education), equity is more grounded in considerations of fairness and justice (Espinoza,

2007) which are not so easily measurable. Although, equity strategies are employed towards achieving equality, a fundamental implication here is that greater equity does not necessarily translate to greater equality; indeed, it may mean just the opposite. This is because attempts to be fair or to exercise justice may result in the provision of ‘special preferences’ (for example, less stringent admission requirements or non-merit-based admission quota reservations) for certain societal groups which is in itself a facilitation of structural inequalities – even if only temporarily (Samoff, 1996). In fact, such provisions have fast become the norm informing popular projects such as the Affirmative Action in America and Widening Participation in the UK that aim to achieve some form of equality in the long run.

Similarly, in Nigeria, the federal character principle has been in operation and within in it, the quota policy of admission to schools. This is in addition to notions of merit-based applications informed by a philosophy of democracy and egalitarianism in the country. As mentioned earlier however, the notions of justice and egalitarianism are quite dynamic and often contradictory so that the strive for equity is far from being unproblematic as it seems to be mediated by varying notions of equality and fairness informed by widely varying factors and forces which themselves vary among and within social contexts and groups.

This paper is informed by the rationale that access barriers to university education, as in the context of Nigeria, need to be wholly conceptualised in all possible shades for sustainable inclusion of marginalised groups to be achieved. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to use Nigeria’s quota system of university admissions as a framework of analysis to highlight institutional impact on access and widening participation in higher education by critically exploring how exclusionary meanings around the concepts of equality, equity and social justice could be informed by and enacted through policy. In so doing, the paper aims to draw more attention to the urgent need for Sub-Saharan African nations in general and Nigeria in particular, to rethink their strategies for the achievement of the SDGs towards the provision of both quality and equitable education for all by the year 2030.

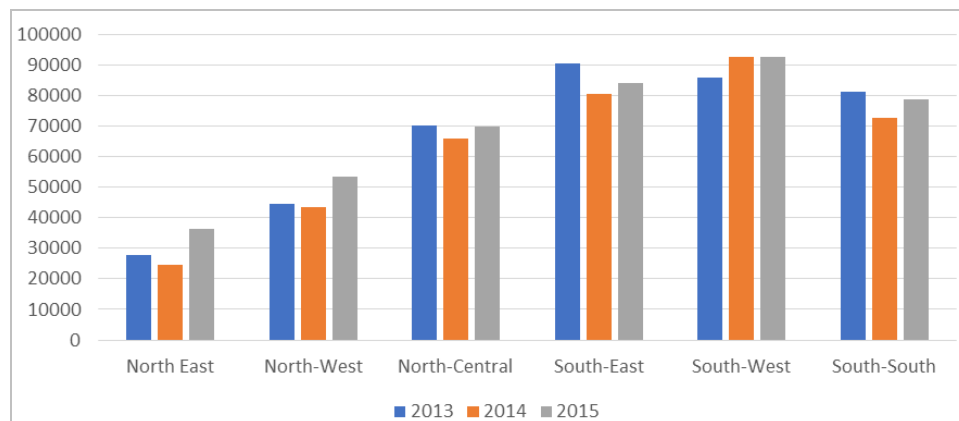
2 The Nigerian context – why university participation parity is fundamental

The most populous country in Africa, Nigeria, has a very diverse population of over 190 million people (United Nations, 2017). The country’s diversity is reflected not only in the multiplicity of ethnicities and the varying cultural and religious values that characterise them but also in terms of wide socio-economic differences within and among social groups. There are hundreds of ethnic groups (Suberu, 2001) spread across the 36 states that make up the Northern and Southern regions of the country. Historically and to the present, there is quite a complex and conflictual dynamic of relations within a tripodal ethnic structure [comprising the Hausas (including the Fulanis) in the North and the Yorubas and Igbos in the South who constitute the most politically influential groups] and between this structure and the administrative divisions (zones and states) of the country as well as communal identities. Specifically, there are distinct but sometimes over-lapping schisms that exist in the country among the three majority groups themselves, between the majority and the other numerous minority groups, between the North and the South, between the 36 states of the federation and the six geo-political

zones (North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-West and South-South) into which they are grouped and then between different religious (including linguistic) affiliations (Otite, 1990; Mustapha, 2007).

The problems that arise from these divisions are only further compounded by corresponding patterns of inequalities in access to higher education attributable to multiple interconnected causes bordering on historical antecedents, geographical elements, cultural values, religious orientation, natural resources endowment as well as government policies and reforms (Mustapha, 2007). Records widely indicate for instance, that the entirety of Northern Nigeria is markedly underrepresented in higher education even though it makes up more than half of the country's total population. Although university access rate in the north seems to have slowly but steadily increased between 2013 and 2015, recent national data provided by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB, 2018) reveal that the highest rate of access recorded in the north within these years is lower than the lowest access rate recorded in the south which is shown to have a generally much higher access rate. Figure 1 displays this data.

Figure 1 Statistics showing regional gaps in university access rate in Nigeria (see online version for colours)



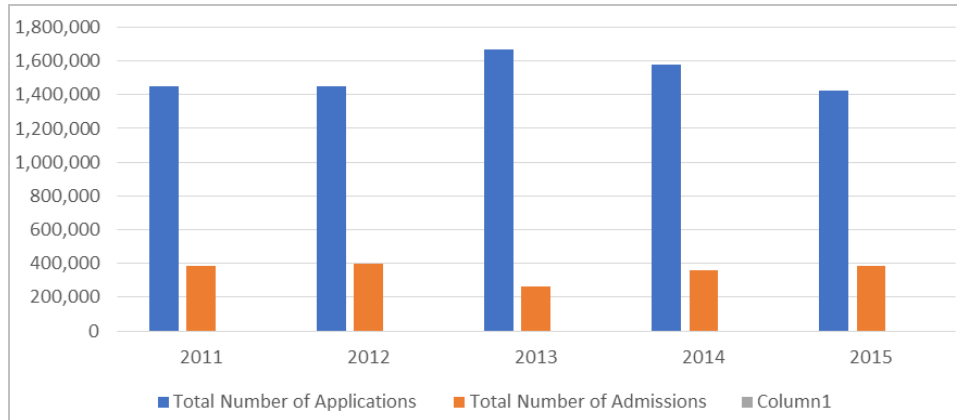
Source: Adapted from the JAMB (2018)

It suffices to say that formal educational qualification has increasingly become a key factor in determining who gets placed in any sector of the Nigerian economy and the attainment of university education in particular, is often a major consideration in decisions about who got the highest jobs as well as better chances of improved economic welfare (O'Connell and Beckett, 1975; Aromolaran, 2004; Ogundari and Aromolaran, 2014). Thus, regarded as a prime tool for upward mobility and a status symbol (Ene, 2007), university degrees are generally perceived in Nigeria as holding the promise of a good future for both individuals. Regional access gap which seem to be widening over the years therefore come with the danger of intensifying ethnic rivalries and indignation and thwarting the possibilities of social cohesion for national development.

On the other hand, statistics have consistently shown that a far greater proportion of those seeking admission into Nigerian universities do not have access despite the phenomenal rise in the number of universities and increased enrolment in higher education (Imhabekhai, 2006). Figure 2 illustrates that the access trend is the same if not

worse over a period of five years even as demand remains on the increase – in 2011, almost 1.5 million candidates applied to university but only less than 400,000 were admitted. The situation is replicated with only slight variations in 2012 through to 2015.

Figure 2 Statistics showing wide disparity in the number of applications and admissions to university in Nigeria (see online version for colours)



Source: Adapted from JAMB (2018)

This nation-wide situation extends the problem beyond just regional boundaries and further compounds the question of how participation parity should be defined and targeted for sustainable development. More so as in the heart of the excessively poor access rate and regional inequalities in access, are also patterns of disparity in university participation along the lines of gender and socio-economic status across the country (Adeyemi, 2001; Onwuameze, 2013). All of these realities, as O'Connell and Beckett (1975) surmise, reflect the extent to which the question of balanced admission to higher education is not just fundamental to most of the political issues in the country but is in itself one of the most critical political issues. Not unconnected to this is Ilusanya's (2008) assertion that the issue of access to higher education in the country is politics, much of which according to Ibrahim (2005) also revolves around preventing and resisting domination of one or more social groups over others.

3 The Nigerian strategy for equitable access – contradictions, omissions and tensions

3.1 'Insignificant' alternatives to higher education and university ownership

It is important to note at this juncture that in Nigeria, there is not only an ingrained discrimination against all other forms of higher education (polytechnics, colleges of education, etc.) in favour of the university but also some form of hierarchy – of choice or preference – among the universities which has major implications for access rates. Majority (irrespective of status or gender) who seek to enter university choose to apply to the federal universities run by the central government because these types of institutions are historically more reputable for quality education and are also supposed to be more

accessible to the masses; they are tuition-free and have been established with the objective of integration and inclusion of all social groups. This is why Nigeria's deregulation reforms from the 1980s that have led to the proliferation of private and state-owned universities (which often charge exorbitant fees anyway) have done very little to abate the crisis of poor access to university; there continues to be an ever-increasing demand for the seemingly better and much more affordable federal universities despite persistent problems of inadequate facilities, under-staffing and poor funding to meet this demand (Saint et al., 2003; Aluede et al., 2012).

3.2 Implications of exclusion in a quota policy for inclusion

To address the gap between demand and supply of university places and the deep-seated inequalities that the situation seems to enhance, the central government have instituted the quota system of admission to federal universities. The quota system is most currently defined in terms of three policy criteria that are applied in selecting students to fill university places annually. These are academic merit, catchment area and educationally less developed states (ELDS). With the overarching aim of being inclusive, this system is a complex one which is in essence, an attempt to provide individual freedom to educational access with its promise of social mobility while at the same time ensuring that national goals of social cohesion, fairness and justice are catered to. The provisions and implications of each selection criterion however, suggest several pitfalls that some may interpret as inimical to facilitating equity in university access. In fact, the dilemma and contradictions embedded in this policy makes it problematic within the historical, cultural and socio-economic context of the Nigerian society.

- *Academic merit (45%)*: This criterion of the quota policy requires that candidates with the highest scores in the selection tests are the first to be considered for admission in their choice of university and course. 45% of the total available places are reserved for such candidates. The criterion has obvious implications for access as it means that many other students who obtain the required test scores and are therefore deemed to be 'academically qualified' for admission may not only fail to get into university in that year but may continue to be denied access in subsequent years if they never manage to be among the top 45% and yet do not qualify for selection under any other criteria. Moreover, the practice in recent times is for stipulated minimum cut-off scores to be unceremoniously increased (say from 180 to 200) when general performance appears very high, often throwing candidates who have achieved the initial required score into panic and other psychological traumas borne from the consequence of failure to get admitted after raised hopes.
- *Catchment area (35%)*: Referring to the locality (often the geographical and/or socio-cultural areas) contiguous to a university, this criterion usually covers around six states surrounding each Federal institution (Adeyemi, 2001). 30% of the available admission places are reserved for applicants who are indigenes of these states and selection is done by choosing the highest test scorers based on a cut-off score determined from the general performance of such applicants. By 'indigene' is meant 'native'; residents of the catchment area that are non-natives are not eligible for this quota. This may mean that applicants who can afford schooling far away from home could take advantage of this provision and possibly gain admission to the university

in their native locality. Conversely, non-native candidates especially those that choose to apply only to a school closest to their place of residence perhaps due to culturally induced gender norms (often with females or first-born males), poor economic status, disability, etc. are disadvantaged. Furthermore, in practice, the 35% quota is further divided into smaller unspecified and often unmonitored percentages in the order of local governments within the state where the university is located and the level of proximity of each catchment state.

- *ELDS, 20%*: The ELDS criterion provides that 20% of available admission places is reserved for candidates from 23 states that have been officially declared educationally disadvantaged. ‘Qualified’ candidates are the top 20% scorers of an ELDS origin who applied to the federal university in question. Considering the wide inequality in access between the north and south, it is unsurprising that every state in the northern region (19 in all) is included in this quota (Imhabekhai, 2006; Abdulkareem and Muraina, 2014). This has however led to references to the criterion as the Northern quota as well as to taken-for-granted assumptions elicited by contentious accounts and arguments of different critics on the true rationale for this criterion. Important though is that it has been alleged by some universities that there are hardly enough candidates from the north to fill this quota, raising the question of whether or not this quota is even relevant and what related factors may be responsible for not getting enough applicants considering the generally high demand for university education.

3.3 *Class, gender, the non-dominant and a complicated merit-based application process*

A strong emphasis on academic performance apparently permeates the entire system of admission even in selections that are based on other criteria not explicitly labelled ‘academic merit’. On this note, those who may not have assets (such as an educated family background, elite secondary school education and so on) that enable them to compete favourably and perform better in the selection tests may as well be constantly excluded from university participation. The university application process is expensive, complex and challenging as it involves a series of written examinations and screening conducted at different stages by different national and institutional bodies who are all involved at different levels in selection decision. The extent to which entrance test scores reflect intellectual ability is also contested and the offer of a university place does not reflect an evident criterion-based logic as there is poor transparency and little or no public accountability for the outcomes of the admission processes. Meanwhile, the double-barrelled issues of gender and socio-economic status which are important drivers of inequality as in the Nigeria context are completely unaddressed in the national quota-based policy. For example, in 2014, it was the case in almost all (over 100) universities in Nigeria, that male admission was generally higher. Statistics in Table 1 is an abridged portrayal of this situation. It is noticeable from Table 1 that the phenomenon of higher male admission cuts across southern and northern universities although the existence of more restrictive religious and socio-cultural values in the north (Biraimah, 1994; Ololube et al., 2013) perhaps makes it more rampant in that region. It is also noteworthy though that the Universities of Technology which are science-based

institutions do not appear to differ widely between the south and north with respect to gender disparity in admission.

Summarily, the critical question with the Nigerian university access strategy is reflected in the possibility of perpetually excluding the 'actual' disadvantaged amongst the 'perceived' disadvantaged. Each ELDS and catchment area for instance, comprises groups that are heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, economic status and of course, gender. The admission policy and practice seem to blur the boundaries within and among these groups and ignore the distinct layers of inequality that arise from these different categorical levels. This is by simply lumping dominant and minority ethnicities, boys and girls, the wealthy and the poor together under singular regional quotas and then subjecting all to a 'merit-driven' system that is also mediated by a questionable exercise of autonomous 'discretion' by those in charge of selection.

Table 1 Gender composition of selected Nigerian universities in 2014 admissions

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Admission</i>		
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	North	4,605	2,003	2,602
Bayero University, Kano	North	3,542	1,789	1,753
Federal University of Technology, Akure	South	2,695	791	1,904
Federal University of Technology, Owerri	South	2,846	881	1,965
Federal University of Technology, Minna	North	2,700	805	1,895
Federal University of Technology, Yola	North	616	189	427
University of Benin	South	4,546	3,638	908
University of Ibadan	South	1,526	1,414	112
University of Jos	North	2,256	1,594	662
University of Nigeria, Nsukka	South	2,964	2,297	667
University of Lagos	South	2,952	2,450	502
University of Maiduguri	North	1,287	421	866

Source: Adapted from JAMB (2018)

4 Deconstructing 'disadvantage' – rethinking access barriers for sustainable inclusion practices

The Nigerian quota policy issues and the vagaries of the application process together have contributed to widespread dissatisfaction with university admissions, elicited heated public debate and to some extent revitalised regional/ethnic tensions that such policies have sought to address. The reality of constrained federal resources for higher education results in conflict as there is a difficult balance between individual and national interests. The practice that entry requirements vary for different groups of people in an admission context that is already highly competitive provokes tensions. The very complex and variable process of individual application to university as well as unclear implementation practices intensifies these tensions yet most importantly, demonstrations and discourses from members of different social groups (males, females, rich, poor, indigenes,

non-indigenes, minority, and dominant) have shown that they all feel equally discriminated against.

The foregoing point that it has become vital to go back to the drawing board and critically reflect on fundamental questions about how the admission system actually addresses inequalities, what unintended consequences there may or may not be for equitable access to university and how these impact distinct social and ethnic groups. This needs to be done against the backdrop of a clear analysis of national and international arguments on equity, an in-depth understanding of diversities and development in modern-day Nigeria as well as a constructive critique of the (traditional) status quo as explicated below.

4.1 The notion of 'merit' and the (neo) liberal ideals of equal opportunity

Zimdars (2007 cited in Nahai, 2013) describes the principle of meritocracy in higher education admissions as entailing the selection of the most academically talented students without regard for their possession of social and cultural capital. This has been the traditional mode of admission to schools in many countries due to the perception that 'fair' recruitment is based solely on students' performance. As a matter of fact, several authors in Nigeria simply decry positive discrimination on the grounds of its implication that some students who are 'more qualified' merit-wise are denied admission on the basis of their state of origin (and/or other criteria) while 'less qualified others' gain admission on the same basis (Suberu, 2001; Duruji et al., 2014). For them, this does not only amount to undue advantage being accorded the latter group but also results in the mass recruitment of candidates who are less able to cope with higher education or contribute positively to improved quality of output. They have thus condemned the quota admission system as only serving to exacerbate the problems of access, equity and quality in higher education (Adeyemi, 2001; Agboola and Ofoegbu, 2010; Imhabekhai, 2006; Kanyip, 2013; Mukoro, 2014) as they lament the poor performance of those admitted and the possible exclusion of the better performing ones.

The above strand of criticism is strengthened by Nigeria's liberalist philosophy of education and the conditions of the educational system. Thus, some subscribers to merit argue that according to Nigeria's educational philosophy which promises a right to equal opportunities for all citizens according to his or her ability (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004; Abdulkareem and Muraina, 2014; Mukoro, 2014), any other arrangements for access besides academic ability compromises uniform quality standards. Especially as Nigeria's education system does not appear to cater for the differing educational needs of its highly diversified range of students, the country's practical redefinition of 'equal opportunities' on the basis of positive discrimination appears untenable.

The foregoing notwithstanding, the Nigerian case for 'meritorious admissions' with its emphasis on the primacy of academic performance is rendered problematic for equity because educational tests are arguably socially and culturally biased. Recent international discourses have challenged the meritocracy principle as it is contended that not only is a clear-cut definition of the concept of 'merit' quite evasive in the context of diversity, but also that meritocracy has been found to be inadvertently decided by the standards, goals or expectations of the prominent or elite societal group. Thus, it is often the case that those who come from advantaged backgrounds are best able to meet academic 'merit' requirement or specification thereby placing all others at a perpetually disadvantaged position – a circumstance that permeates sustained dominance and social inequalities

(Bourdieu, 1974, 1977; Breen and Goldthorpe, 2001; Gale and Parker, 2015). For example, Askary et al. (2015) clearly demonstrate that communication skills are essential for the academic progress of higher education students in business disciplines but argue that the modes of socialisation to which the students are exposed would largely determine their ability to develop excellent communication skills. Accordingly, they opine that students' intellectual capital is strongly linked to their backgrounds and cultural values.

For the above reasons, Bourdieu (1986) theorises that educational systems reproduce inequalities in society by ignoring the role of capital such as wealth, social influence et cetera and by awarding honours under the assumption that academic success or failure is purely an effect of natural aptitude. In this connection, Nahai (2013, p.683) posits that "depending on the political motivations of those formulating its definition, fairness-as-meritocracy might feasibly result in distinct injustice." By extension, the neoliberal notion of a socially just system as one that offers educational opportunity on 'equal grounds' (following meritocratic procedures and rules) to all individuals is seen as contradictory because talent and ability are not necessarily individual attributes but a product of reproductive inequalities of class, gender, race, etc. (Morley, 1997; Reay, 2012). The prevalence of examination malpractice in the Nigerian context (Alutu and Aluede, 2006) – again to the detriment of the 'poor man's pocket' and the 'upright man's beliefs' – further compromises the supremacy of academic performance and calls for the re-evaluation of the efficacy of 'merit' as the ultimate basis for selection to university.

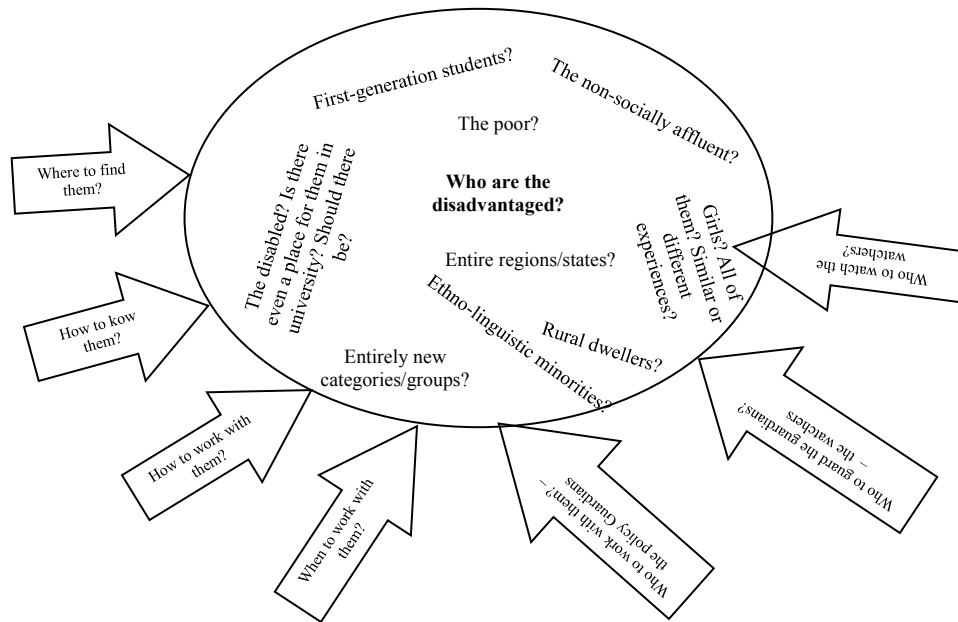
4.2 Dysfunctional quotas and new dimensions to old conditions

Although the preceding arguments against 'merit' have engendered considerable literature advocating equity-based systems of admission which are not entangled with meritocratic mechanisms and which recognise the peculiar characteristics of disadvantaged groups (Nahai, 2013), critical literature has also established that complete fairness or equity seems evasive whether enforced through meritocratic principles or by 'positive discrimination' due to ingrained inequalities in broader social and economic milieus (Karabel, 1972; Lane and Birds, 2013; Nahai, 2013). Beyond merely advocating inclusion therefore, scholars have critically examined legislations on inclusion as well as equality discourses within these legislative practices themselves. Authors are of the opinion that policies of inclusion do not necessarily improve the plight of disadvantaged groups (Morley, 1997; Kenway et al., 1998; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Youdell, 2006; Gale and Parker, 2015). This is because they are often informed by a misconception of the nature of social inequality (Gale and Parker, 2015; Tenret, 2016) and located right within the existing frameworks of discrimination and prejudice (Morley, 1997) which make them ignore (or sometimes foster) structural and institutionalised practices that support the conditions of exclusion or disadvantage. Hence, Youdell (2006) argues that links between identity markers such as social class, ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, disability, etc. and educational experiences are not inevitable but rather a product of discriminatory practices (whether explicit and intentional or not) usually not addressed by inclusion policies.

A relevant question therefore is, how equitable can the Nigerian quota system of admission make educational opportunities when it omits to recognise the crucial and persistent issue of gender inequality and how does this omission reflect contemporary Nigerian thinking? This is important especially when international notions of educational

gender inequality are put into perspective. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1995) for example, disparity in male and female literacy rates is not simply a matter of the educational opportunities provided to the different genders but also an expression of society’s development as well as its capacity and willingness to produce such opportunities. While Nigerian literature is dominated by the North versus South element of the admission system and a quest for equality-by-merit, only a few authors have given attention to the equally important issues of gender and socio-economic background as impacting on patterns of access with reference to the quota system. Yet it has been observed that whereas gender gaps may be closing particularly in the south with regards to university access, high imbalance exists across disciplines and programmes in Nigerian universities with females often predominant in ‘soft’ courses like Linguistics or Mass Communication and males in the much more ‘valued’ courses like Engineering and Medicine (Adeyemi and Akpotu, 2004; Mukoro, 2014). Thus, Adeyemi and Akpotu (2004, p.366) find it disheartening that Nigeria’s university admission policy with all its quotas for ensuring fair representation, does not include any special preferences for the female whom they describe as “culturally and religiously constrained.” Likewise, Biraimah (1994) observes that sex stereotyping has adverse effect on education access in Nigeria, particularly at the university level and expresses the exigent need for strategic plans to eliminate sexism and gender disparities in the system.

Figure 3 An illustrative model to deconstructing the concept of social disadvantage



Source: Author

Studies have also shown that irrespective of region, basic education enrolment as well as the advancement to higher education is greatly dependent on parents’ socio-economic status or family background in the country (Kazeem et al., 2010). In her study, Biraimah (1994) found that not just gender but also class definitely affected both university access

and students' aspirations once admitted to university in Nigeria. In some cases of gender discrimination in the home, the family's socio-economic background clearly counts in whether the girl gets to go to university because preference is most likely given to the male child if finance is limited. Furthermore, Onwuameze (2013, p.34) posits that there is a popular perception in Nigeria that future destinations such as admission to selective schools and subsequent success in the labour market is highly dependent on 'who you know' and that the wealthy who are likely to have connections, use these to secure better positions for their children.

It will be expected that an effective inclusion policy initiative would actively take the forgoing issues into account and do so not just by instituting general access quotas but also by exploring new dimensions to these issues. Apart from gender streaming for instance, there are claims of the ELDS quota not being filled by the targeted people, of candidates faking affidavits of local government origin with hopes of gaining admission under the catchment area quota, of the complex application process promoting examination malpractice and admission fraud, of increasing financial and sexual exploitation of desperate applicants and so on. It may therefore be apt to recognise some quotas that may be dysfunctional for the purpose of inclusive access and to redefine or substitute them. This process of restructuring should necessarily be informed by critical speculation of who exactly new reforms should target and how who may vary among where and when. Grass-root problems must also not be ignored and implementation strategies must be detailed. Figure 3 is an attempt to portray what this should involve.

5 Conclusions and prospects

Archer (2007, p.636) tries "to disentangle discourses around 'diversity' from those around 'equity' and consider how the rhetoric of diversity and equality is being mobilised with non-equitable consequences through the operation of widening participation within a neoliberal agenda in the UK." Metcalfe (2009) shows that the inclusion reform in Canada does not address among other things, geo-spatial access barriers as well as prestige differences among institutions thus making participation remain a challenge to Aboriginal students and other under-represented groups. Bozalek and Boughey (2012) analyses how post-apartheid higher education policies in South Africa continue to be influenced by racially informed apartheid policies, how this leads to mis-framing and a rather simplified conception of the grave issues affecting higher education in the country and how it is having devastating effects on certain groups of people while continuing to advantage others who are privileged. And very recently, Tenret (2016) demonstrates that affirmative action in Sudanese universities has become inefficient in reducing inequalities and dampening socio-ethnic tensions. These observations simply lend credence to the argument in this paper that inadequate or unsuitable theoretical policy provisions, inefficient implementation practices and unrealistic perceptions of goal attainment are banes of progress in the Nigerian university system with reference to increasing access.

It is increasingly apparent that the strive for sustainable development in the country should necessarily include strategies for equitable distribution of the valuable resource, that is higher education, amongst its diverse group of people. Yet, the observed problems with the quota policy and practice as well as wide-spread dissatisfaction leading to such descriptions of the system as 'geographical apartheid' (Suberu, 2001) make it quite

exigent to investigate the system from a critical perspective that takes into account experiential differences and new possibilities. If equity is indeed key to the attainment of the SDGs in Nigeria and Africa, then more than a blind acceptance of the status quo is overdue. A major implication of the reflections in this paper is that seemingly laudable policies like the Nigeria's quota system which are instituted to promote equal participation in education might, on a closer look, be inadvertently producing unintended consequences and achieving the opposite results. It is therefore, hoped that this paper provokes some extensive qualitative research on equity policy implementation practices and their impact on less-privileged people in Nigeria and other developing countries. As Griffith (2017) observes with reference to the case of the University of Guyana, universities in developing countries like Nigeria must learn to make research and knowledge generation a major focus to enhance their role in national development.

While the importance of pursuing the SDGs have been emphasised, it can be further deduced from the discussion of local policy in this paper that all contextual indices of social inequality need equivalent attention if sustainable development is envisaged. It is quite unfeasible to evaluate the attainability of equity on the general basis of regional disparities within a country while ignoring the workings of specific sites of exclusion such as gender, ethnicity, geographical location (rural-urban) and socio-economic status which cut across all regions. This is why Illie and Rose (2016) in their analysis of data from 35 low- and middle-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia doubt the attainment of equal access to higher education by 2030 and conclude that expansion in access to higher education may continue to predominantly benefit the rich unless drastic measures to reduce demographic inequalities around wealth and gender are keenly pursued. The catchment area quota of the Nigerian system is one case that demonstrates how regions within a country might be generally classified as achieving increasing access to university when it is indeed only members of the dominant ethnicities within such regions that are increasingly represented. A slightly similar argument is captured in the study of Mafukata (2016) on university transformation trends in South Africa in terms of staff diversity. His summation is that while agitation and efforts to include more females and local nationals are concentrated and achieving positive outcomes in urban-based universities, top positions in rural-based universities remain dominated by foreign nationals and white males. Another strand of hope or prospect therefore is that discussions in this paper informs access policy reforms targeted at achieving wholesome inclusion of marginalised groups in education within Nigeria in particular and the African continent in general.

Finally, discussions in this paper have probed the nature of academic merit, concluding that there is indeed need for further investigation into the factors that mediate academic excellence within the local contexts of societies and the contexts of individual lives. This is because as established in literature, fairness-by-merit is as complicated as fairness-by-positive-discrimination since there is really no such thing as a neutral ground for building talents. Academic talents are necessarily shaped and developed through the availability of quality educational resources and support (Humble and Dixon, 2017) which are mostly accessible to the more privileged in society. Hence, while policy trajectories for widening higher education participation are being considered, the extent to which the meritocracy principle might negate positive outcomes for target groups should also be crucially foreshadowed.

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