

DEREGULATION OF EDUCATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF EQUAL ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study focused on determining the degree equal access to university education is guaranteed in Nigeria under the current deregulation system. The study employed two research questions and two null hypotheses to guide the study. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. A 21-item questionnaire instrument was administered to 2,444 respondents (lecturers and students) drawn from the 18 universities in south-east Nigeria. The researcher also employed the use of an interview schedule which was administered to six interviewees randomly selected from both public and private universities in the area of study. The information from the interview was used to enrich the discussion of the findings. Mean score and the standard deviation statistical tools were used to answer the research questions while the t-test statistics was used to test the null hypotheses. The findings revealed that deregulation of university education is inimical to equal access to university education. This is mainly because the policy brought about an era of prohibitive fees that makes university education too expensive to the effect that while the rich can easily afford it, the poor are priced out of it. By that token, they (the poor) are denied access to university education which they so much crave for, and they are by that token as well denied their right to equally access university education like the rich. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended, inter alia, that government should continually increase funding of university education so as to reduce the burden of fees on parents and thereby increase equal access; government should as well provide financial incentives to indigent students in form of scholarships and or soft loans, so as to enable all, who are willing and capable, to access university education.

Key words: Deregulation of Education, Equal access to education, University Education.

Introduction

Deregulation is a pure economic term that advocates for reduction and or cessation of government control in the provision or supply of goods or

services. It an economic term that is historically traceable to Adam Smith's *laissez-faire* theory.

It is synonymous with privatization, and it aims at removal of government regulations and the invitation of the private sector participation in a free market-force/driven competition. Proponents of deregulation calls for a paradigm shift from government monopoly, characterized by regulations, to a liberalized market-driven competition devoid of government control

Deregulation, sees government as poor managers, thus according to Jaji (2004), deregulation is predicated on the assumption of state inefficiency and absolute efficiency of the market. The logic here, as Asogwa & Asogwa (2011) puts it, is that private sector involvement in provision of certain goods and services ensures efficient management, adequate funding, healthy competition, etc.; that cannot be in government monopoly. This is why many nations of the world, not excluding Nigeria, outsourced some services to the private sector. Following this, telecommunication, power distribution, air transport etc.; that were hitherto under government monopoly in Nigeria, are now in the hands of private investors. The education sector was not left out in this pervading milieu of deregulation as there now exist private schools at all levels of the Nigerian education system, including in the tertiary level.

The policy was adopted into education with the hope that it would revamp public educational system under government monopoly. It was hoped that deregulation, will succeed in education – especially at university level – making it better, cheaper and equally accessible. Akpotu (2005) rightly noted that the major goals of deregulating university education, among other things, was to increase access at moderate costs affordable to all and to eliminate inequities. After more than two decades of deregulation of university education in Nigeria (May, 1999 – till date) it is pertinent to ask whether deregulation of university education has delivered on these promises: has access increased at cheaper costs? Is there equal or unequal opportunity of access? Is university more affordable now than it were prior to deregulation? These questions beg for urgent answers and they form major preoccupation of this study, especially on how deregulation guarantees equal access to university education.

The issue of equal access to university education is a current educational problem that has occupied the mind of educational experts and indeed all education stakeholders, especially in south east Nigeria. Equal access to education is all about fairness in the offering of educational opportunities to each and every individual. It refers to 'same treatment devoid of unwarranted discrimination' (Asogwa & Asogwa (2011). Since university education, according to Nwagwu (2005) enhances opportunity in the labour

market with prospects of higher socio-economic status, no nation worth its name should neglect its equitable distribution. Cognizance of this, and in line with Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) charter of 1948, which stipulates that: 'higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit'; Nigeria avowed in her constitution to ensure that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels (FRN, 1999), she also declared in her National Policy on Education (NPE) that 'every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities' (FRN, 2004:7). These golden provisions seem to be compromised by the current deregulation practice in Nigerian university education system because ability to afford the prohibitive fees attached to admission placement seem to be the key to access. This, according to Malogo (2005) favours the rich at the expense of the poor who are in the majority. Deregulation is on this note seen to be patently antithetical to the view that education is for all irrespective of means (Wokocha, 2005). Our concern here is to ascertain the extent equal access is assured under deregulation milieu.

The following research questions and null hypotheses tested at 0.05 level of significance guided the study:

- What is the degree to which equal access to university education is guaranteed in a deregulated university education system?
- What is the degree to which citizen's right to university education is guaranteed in a deregulated university education system?
- There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and students in public and private universities on the degree to which equal access is guaranteed in a deregulated education system.
- There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and students in public and private universities on the degree to which deregulation ensures citizen's right to university education.

Method

In the study a descriptive survey design was adopted. According to Eze (2005) the descriptive survey design uses reliable techniques to collect data from a well-defined population or systematically selected segments of the population for the purpose of determining the attributes of the entire population. The design is best suited for the present study because it dealt with large population sizes. The study is carried out in the 18 universities located in South East Nigeria - comprising of 5 federal, 5 state and 8 private universities. The population for the study is 538,550, made up of 705 Heads of Departments (HOD's) 8,703 lecturers and 235,321 students of the 18

universities in South East Nigeria (FRN, 2013) plus the 18 registrars and 235,321 parents of (the 235,321) students of the universities in South East Nigeria. These were chosen because, as stakeholders in universities, they are variously in positions to know and to give credible response on the topic at issue.

The sample for the study consisted of 2,444 respondents to the questionnaire (comprising of 6 HOD's, 86 lecturers and 2,352 students) and 12 persons on the interview schedule (comprising of 6 HOD's, 3 university administrators, and 3 parents), giving a total sample of 2,456- consisting of 1% of the total population mentioned above. This were drawn using the Proportionate stratified sampling technique and in agreement with Nwanna (1982) who stated that when the population of a study is in several thousands, a 5% or less sample can serve.

The researcher developed a structured 22 item questionnaire, and an interview schedule which were used for the study. The questionnaire; titled Deregulation of University Education Appraisal Questionnaire (DUEAQ)is modeled on a four-point response. The interview schedule is a 10 item question that follows from the major purpose of the study.

Three experts validated the instruments and the reliability co-efficient of 0.90 was established using Cronbach Alfa statistics for test of internal consistency. The instrument was administered by the researcher assisted by 18 trained assistance, one in each of the 18 universities in the south east. The researcher also had face-to-face interview with 11 resource persons while one respondent was interviewed via telephone.

Using the descriptive statistical tools of mean scores and standard deviation, the real limit of numbers were used to interpret the data.0.50-1.49 (Very Low Degree: VLD), 1.50-2.49 (Low Degree LD), 2.50-3.49 (High Degree: HD), 3.50-4.00 (Very High Degree: VHD). The t-test statistics was used in testing the null hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level. Responses to the interview schedule was used to corroborate or disapprove the results of the questionnaire at the discussion of findings.

Results

Table 1: Mean (x) ratings on access to university education in a deregulated university education system

S/N	Questionnaire item summary	Public Universities			Private Universities		
		X	SD	DEC	X̄	SD	DEC
1	Government ensures equal access to education.	1.84	0.66	LD	2.16	0.59	LD
2	Opportunity for access to university education is ensured under deregulated university system.	1.74	0.67	LD	1.39	0.84	LD
3	Education is provided as an inalienable right of every citizen by the state.	3.62	0.60	VHD	3.83	0.44	VHD
4	Admission places are still inadequate	3.67	0.62	VHD	3.86	0.46	VHD

	to a large number of candidates.							
5	Increase in the number of universities as a result of deregulation made admission places adequate	1.61	0.62	LD	1.39	0.82	LD	
6	Equal access is assured more in public than in private universities	3.16	0.65	HD	3.02	0.46	HD	
7	Merit is used more in public than in private universities.	3.65	0.65	VHD	3.82	0.56	VHD	
8	Access to private universities is equally accessible to the rich and the poor.	1.89	0.92	LD	1.51	0.56	LD	
9	Equality in access to university education was more prior to deregulation.	3.19	1.05	HD	3.82	0.49	VH	
10	Deregulation does not guarantee access to university education.	3.68	0.61	VHD	3.82	0.56	VHD	
11	Financial ability guarantees access to University education under deregulation.	3.70	0.56	VHD	3.94	0.33	VHD	
12	Proliferation of universities in Nigeria has led to greater access.	2.46	0.92	LD	2.22	0.66	LD	
13	Deregulation does not guarantee equal educational opportunities to all.	3.67	0.61	VHD	3.78	0.71	VHD	
Cluster mean.		2.90	0.70	HD	2.97	0.58	HD	

The data presented in Table 1 above shows that items 1, 2 and 5 with mean scores ranging from 1.61-1.84 are rated low degree by the respondents from both public and private universities indicating that they hold the opinion that under deregulation, government does not ensure equality of access to education and that admission places are still inadequate despite the increase in the number of universities. Also on the table, items 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 13 with mean scores all above 3.50 were rated very high by the respondents showing that, inter alia, they hold the opinion that, to a very high degree, that merit is used more in admission in public universities than in private universities and that financial ability guarantees access to university; thus they agree that deregulation does not guarantee equal educational opportunities to all.

Table 2: Summary of t-test for Hypothesis One

Subject:	No	X	SD	df	LS	t-cal	t-table	Decision
Public University:	1507	2.90	0.70	2017	0.05	-3.50	1.96	Not rejected
Private University:	512	2.97	0.58					

Table 2 above presents the independent t-test analysis of the mean difference in the response opinions of the respondents on the above research question. The result shows that the calculated t-value which is -3.50 is less than the critical table value of 1.96, thus the hypothesis is not rejected. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean opinions of lecturers and students in public and private universities on the degree to which equal access is guaranteed in a deregulated education system.

Table 3: Mean ratings of citizens' right to university education in a deregulated university education system.

S/N	Questionnaire item	Public Universities			Private Universities		
		X	SD	DEC	X	SD	DEC
1	Access to university education is not guaranteed in a deregulated education system	3.73	0.58	VHD	3.91	0.42	VHD
2	With the increasing poverty in Nigeria, man will be denied the right to university education.	3.62	0.54	VHD	3.91	0.39	VHD
3	Economic status determines the right of access to university education.	3.16	0.62	HD	2.66	0.66	HD
4	Reduction in government involvement in education negates citizens' right to university education.	3.67	0.60	VHD	3.87	0.41	VHD
5	High school fees negate right to access university education.	3.37	0.71	HD	3.16	0.49	HD
6	Deregulation negates equal access to education	3.24	1.01	HD	3.72	0.56	VHD
7	Denial of access to education negates the constitutional provision on equal access.	3.58	0.63	VHD	3.69	0.76	VHD
8	Low percentage of Nigerians has access to university education.	3.63	0.66	VHD	3.85	0.69	VHD
Cluster mean		3.50	0.67	VHD	3.60	0.58	VHD

Data from table 3 show that items 14, 15, 17, 20 and 21 with mean scores above 3.50 are rated very high degree while items 16 and 18 with mean scores well above 2.50 indicating high degrees. Thus, the respondents are unanimous in their position that deregulation does not guarantee citizen's right to university education and that many will be denied the right to university education with the increasing poverty in Nigeria which, in their view, ultimately, amounts to a denial of the constitutional provisions allowing equal access to education. For them also, economic status determines the right of access to university education and high school fees negates the right to access university education.

Table 4. Summary of t-test for Hypothesis Two

Subject:	N	X̄	SD	df	Ls	t-cal	t-table	Decision
Public University:	1507	3.50	0.67	2017	0.05	-5.00	1.96	Not rejected
Private University:	512	3.60	0.58					

Table 4 above presents the summary of the t-test analysis of the mean ratings of lecturers and students in public and private universities on the degree to which deregulation will ensure citizens right to university education. It is readily observable with the calculated t-value of -5.00 being less than the critical table value of 1.96, the hypothesis is not rejected, thus there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and students in public and private universities on the degree to which deregulation will ensure citizens right to university education.

Discussion

The results of the study with respect to research question one shows that it is the perspective of the respondents that, inter alia, admission places are still inadequate to a large number of students seeking admission despite the increase in the number of universities; that financial ability guarantees access for the few who are able to make it and deregulation does not guarantee equal educational opportunity to all.

These findings give serious concern as they are indeed disturbing. This is because, the deregulation policy seems to have yielded negative consequences as far as university education is concerned in Nigeria. This is so because, according to Akpotu (2005), the major goals of deregulating university education, among other things, is to increase access to higher education at moderate costs that families can afford and to eliminate inequalities. Contrary to this, the policy has precipitated to an era of very high fees instead of the 'moderate prices' (fees) promised, and this has increased inequity in admission, such that the rich with far less grades and abilities, either take up the admission placement which the poor is unable to afford in public university or simply strolls into a private university and take/buy up a choice course. The poor even with higher grades and abilities are 'priced out' of private university entirely and still struggles (where possible) to pay for the high fees of public universities.

This is inequity at its highest level and it is true despite the increase in the number of universities under the present deregulation regime. No doubt, this alarming situation needs urgent redress.

So, deregulation of university education has led to inequity since it does not guarantee equal access to children from different socio-economic backgrounds. In essence, since financial ability is seen by the respondents as the major guarantee of access, children with poor financial background, irrespective of their intelligence, are less opportune to have access to university education unlike their rich counterparts. This negates the promise of 'equal access to education' as espoused by the UNO charter of 1948.

Malogo (2005) is therefore right to lament that when access to university education is offered on the basis of one's financial ability, education is hijacked by men of wealth and influence such that the children of the poor already stand disadvantaged.

Respondents from the follow-up interview conducted variously collaborated these facts. For instance, a University administrator noted that deregulation has kept many away from universities because of inability to pay the usually very high fees that are affordable to the rich and very few average income families. Analyses of data in respect of hypothesis one showed that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of lecturers and students in the public and private universities on the degree equal access to university education is guaranteed under deregulation milieu. This is true because, under deregulation, financial ability, and not merit, is the major guarantee of access, and this limits the opportunity of the poor and low income earners, unlike the rich. This negates section 18(c) of Nigerian constitution where the government promised to ensure *equal* and *adequate* educational opportunities at all levels of the educational system (FRN, 1999). It is obvious that neither equal nor adequate educational opportunity is currently provided by the Nigerian government under the current deregulation of university education.

The study also revealed that both lecturers and students in public and private universities are unanimous in their view that with the poverty in Nigeria, many will be denied the right to university education due to the high fees. The findings are indeed not surprising to the researcher because the deregulation policy actually leads to reduction of government expenditure and the shifting of the responsibility of funding to the private investor or user in a market-driven milieu.

Unfortunately in Nigeria, the people have to pay more to access the services which they hitherto accessed freely or at a cheaper cost when government subsidized such services. At that time, unlike now, both the rich and poor had equal access to education since merit, and not financial ability, was the major determinant.

Thus, sequel to prohibitive increase in fees, the fundamental right to education as provided in article 26 of the UNO Charter is compromised. In such a situation, children from high economic background, as Tonwe (2005) rightly puts it, will have the chance of being educated while children from lower socio-economic background will definitely be disadvantaged. The fact that over 70% of Nigerians still live below the poverty line of one US dollar (\$1) per day makes the situation even worse. Thus many who are able and willing to access university education will be denied that right due to financial

inabilities. Yet, the National Policy on Education stated that *every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities without disabilities, each according to his or her ability* (FRN, 2004). Deregulation policy, no doubt, denies the above right, and rightly did Wokocha (2005) note that deregulation policy is patently antithetical to the view that education is for all irrespective of means.

Respondents in the interview sessions are in agreement with the findings of the study with focus on the degree citizen's right to education is guaranteed in a deregulated education system. A university administrator among the interviewees noted that deregulation denies the less privileged the right to go to universities even when they have the ability and have actually qualified. Thus, deregulation does not guarantee the citizens right to university education.

Conclusion

The deregulation policy was adopted in Nigerian educational circle, including universities, with the hope and promise that the ensuing market driven competition will increase access at cheaper costs that will be affordable to all. However, the policy so far has failed on the promises. This is because, although it increased opportunity of access, they are offered at high and prohibitive charges that are easily affordable to the rich and far beyond the reach of the poor majority. This was not the case prior to deregulation. The study, thus, revealed that the policy does not guarantee equal opportunity of access to children from both rich and poor economic background.

It also revealed that the policy does not guarantee citizen's right to education. The study recommends that government actions in terms of increased funding, provision of grant-in-aids and scholarships, among other things, will improve equal access to university education.

Recommendations

1. Government should continually increase funding of university education so that as to make it affordable and thus accessible for children of all economic status.
2. Caution should be exercised in adopting educational policies from other climes, especially the developed nations, because the economic, social, and political difference may hamper the success here, as is now the case with deregulation.
3. Government should provide financial incentives to private universities to reduce their over dependence on fees for sustenance.

4. Government should provide scholarships, bursary and soft loans so that children from poor homes who are able can easily access university education.

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