



**THE POLITICS OF ACCESS:
UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AND NATION-BUILDING
IN NIGERIA, 1948-2000**

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ISBN 978-1-55238-580-7

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Centralization of Universities and National Integration, 1970–79: The Legacy of the Nigerian Civil War

The universities should be a vehicle for the promotion of national consciousness, unity, understanding and peace.... Education is a recognized factor of unity in a nation, but unfortunately we still have within our nation educational disparity which tends to undermine the desires and efforts to achieve true unity; because there can only be true unity where educational opportunities and resultant facilities, amenities and benefits are evenly distributed.

– OLUSEGUN OBASANJO, 1976

Introduction

Most postcolonial African countries wrestled with the problem of uniting members of their pluralistic societies in what Emile Durkheim calls a *conscience collective*. Social solidarity within a society, as Durkheim notes, is possible “if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity by fixing in the child, from beginning, the essential similarity that collective life demands.”¹ At its independence in 1960, Nigeria was a state devoid of a national identity. As many studies have shown, the diverse ethnic groups within Nigeria had divergent and conflicting interests, often

claiming different heritage, language, and culture.² The British indirect rule system of administration that entrenched separate ethnic and regional identities worsened the historical rivalries and hostilities among the country's nationalities. These problems crystallized in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70). The war highlighted the rivalries that characterized Nigeria's pluralistic society and questioned the viability of the 'nationalists' project. Yet, it rekindled the federal government's determination to explore ways of uniting the country's diverse groups together as a nation, one of which was by closing the educational gap existing between the North and the South.

Given the bitter experiences of the war, the overriding emphasis of the postwar social programs, including education, was, understandably, to keep the country together. The end of the civil war on 12 January 1970 was thus a turning point in the country's educational history; it marked a rebirth of the Nigerian nation and ushered in a new era typified by the implementation of far-reaching educational programs. Notably, the question of national unity and integration based on balanced educational development featured prominently in the mass university education experiments of the 1970s. The ideal of a nation, reinforced after the civil war, formed the philosophical foundation for post-1970 push for massification of university education. The military head of state, Yakubu Gowon, set the nation-building tone in his victory speech at the end of the war when he affirmed his administration's desire to foster national "reintegration, reconciliation, and reconstruction," requesting Nigerians to help "rebuild the nation anew."³ Since the government could not affirm a non-existent collective conscience, it was prepared, among other things, to use mass university education policies to create one – an essential step in nation-building.

Throughout the 1970s, therefore, the successive military governments of Gowon (1966–75), Murtala Mohammed (1975–76), and Olusegun Obasanjo (1976–79) assumed an exclusive control of university education as a strategic tool to facilitate national unity and economic development. This historic shift in the country's educational development had more to do with the legacy of the civil war and the federal government's desire to assert control over the nation state. In a sense, the shift in the nature of the Nigerian state caused a major shift in the country's educational management.

Continuing Elitism

The civil war exacerbated the existing shortages in university places, interrupting the goal of mass university education. It affected all levels of educational activities, especially in the eastern states where educational facilities were destroyed. At the end of the war, the federal government anticipated a real explosion in the numbers of qualified candidates seeking university education, which, according to Gowon, called "for expansion of existing institutions either in size or in numbers and, possibly, both."⁴ Gowon believed that such expansion was necessary in order to supply the skilled personnel required to champion economic development.⁵ The statistics of student population in the existing universities in Ibadan, Nsukka, Lagos, Zaria, and Ife were marked by a dearth of university places, domination by southerners, and low enrolment in the sciences. In 1970, only 14,468 students were studying in all the universities. When compared to Nigeria's population, estimated at about 51 million, the number was statistically insignificant. The facilities at the existing universities were grossly inadequate to accommodate increasing demand for places. For instance, out of the 7,000 applicants in the 1969/70 session, only 1,500 secured admissions.⁶ In addition, students from the South, who constituted more than 75.6 per cent of the total student population, dominated the universities; and less than 46 percent were in the science courses.⁷ These numbers fell below government expectations. In fact, the inadequate access and the need to satisfy the educational needs of its indigenes compelled the Midwestern State to found the Institute of Technology in Benin. The planning of this institute began in 1967 but was suspended due to the civil war. It eventually opened on 23 November 1970 with 108 students, only to become the University of Benin when the National Universities Commission granted it the status of a university on 1 July 1971.⁸

The primary factor that determined and limited student admission was the lack of facilities (classes and hostels) to accommodate demand and the increasing incidence of multiple admissions. The supply of university places was insufficient even when the number of potential entrants based on passes in the Advanced Level examination increased from 6,739 in 1970 to 15,363 in 1975.⁹ For example, in the 1970/71 session, out of 8,926 candidates that applied to the University of Ife, the university admitted only 1,179,

even though 4,311 applicants were qualified. In the University of Ibadan, 10,036 candidates applied for admission in 1970/71, 4,682 were qualified, but 1,383 were offered admission.¹⁰ In his welcome addresses to new students, the vice-chancellor of the University of Lagos, J.F. Ade Ajayi, noted that “the gap between the demand for and supply of university places [was a] widening gap, which makes it necessary to accord special congratulations to those who have succeeded against odds to secure admission to the university.”¹¹ He further observed that

the transition from school to University in this country is no longer smooth; it has become a stormy and capricious passage that gives would-be students and their parents far more worries than the transition from Elementary to Secondary School.¹²

It was due to its determination to expand access to university education for economic development and national unity that the federal government launched the Second National Development Plan (Second NDP) that emphasized education. The plan proclaimed to transform Nigeria, among others things, into “a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.”¹³ As the plan noted, the federal government faced a choice to either provide university education to all Nigerians “for its own sake, as a means of enriching an individual’s knowledge and developing his full personality ... or to prepare people to undertake specific tasks and employment functions which are essential for the transformation of their environment.”¹⁴ However, as the Second NDP acknowledged, “Nigeria should in her stage of development, regard education as both.”¹⁵ The plan sought to restore facilities and services damaged or disrupted by the civil war but desired to develop and expand education at various levels in order to attain higher admission ratios while at the same time reducing the educational gap in the country. Owing to the civil war, the UNN in particular suffered from “severe deterioration of existing faculties, academic and public buildings, student hostels and staff houses; serious environmental degradation; and inadequate space for academic activities, recreational facilities.”¹⁶ Therefore, the Second NDP allocated large funds for the rehabilitation, reconstruction, and expansion of its facilities and those of other universities. It was a prelude to federal takeover of universities.

Federal Control of University Education

The three successive military governments in the 1970s upheld a centralized control of university education as a strategic tool to both facilitate access and forge greater national integration. This posture marked a radical departure from the early 1960s when the three regions controlled much of their fate with minimal federal interference. Despite regional control of education, the educational gap between the North and South, which began during the colonial period, remained a source of tension between the two areas. By the 1970s, that gap, as the federal commissioner of education, A.Y. Eke, revealed, was so wide that

roughly speaking, for every child in a primary school in the northern states there are four in the southern states; for every boy or girl in a secondary school in the north there are five in the south. And for every student in a post-secondary institution in the north there are six in the south.¹⁷

Gowon had unsuccessfully called on all the universities to close this gap by assuming a national outlook in their admission policies. He stressed that the success of universities would be contingent on “the extent to which [they] can meet the needs and aspirations of the society which they are established to serve.”¹⁸

The federal government’s move towards centralization of university education effectively began in 1967. In that year, the creation of twelve states from the four regions created a new dimension to the university question. States without universities began to campaign for one. But in 1970, six states out of twelve had universities. Ahmadu Bello University was located in the North Central State; the University of Nsukka in the East-Central State; the University of Lagos in the federal capital city of Lagos; the universities in Ibadan and Ile-Ife in the Western State; and the University of Benin in the Mid-Western State. The six remaining states – North-Eastern State, North-Western State, Kano State, Benue/Plateau State, South-Eastern State, and Rivers State – had none. Of the six states without universities, four were located in the former Northern Region, an area marked by low enrolment in university education and considered

educationally disadvantaged. These states embarked on vigorous plans to establish their own universities. Ownership of a university was considered a symbol of state pride. Given the level of ethnic rivalry, an unregulated establishment of universities carried the potential of exacerbating the existing tensions and straining local resources. As noted in the *Ibadan* editorial of July 1970:

The real danger [lies] in the creation of State institutions which will be inward-looking and inbreeding.... [The] isolation of the youth of each state of the Federation into their State Universities will not make for the much needed unity of the country. There exists the fearful danger that both students and their teachers will remain within their States and that a new type of "tribalism" will develop.¹⁹

Resisting the proliferation of state universities while consolidating and expanding the facilities in the existing universities seemed the right course of action. In its delegation to Nigeria in 1970, the Inter-University Council (IUC) condemned plans by some Nigerian states to establish their own universities. IUC urged the federal government through the CVC to strengthen the existing universities to enable them meet the demands for admission as well as to provide quality education rather than spending limited resources to fund new universities.²⁰ The federal government was also worried about the negative impact of an uncoordinated establishment of universities on both the academic standards and government finances. Given the shift in the nature of the country towards a unitary system of government, Gowon felt that the central control of universities was vital in the process of nation-building. The Dina Committee had recommended to the federal government in 1969 to take custody of all the revenue in the country as well as the universities that were hitherto controlled by the regions. Although the four regions protested, Gowon went ahead to implement most of the recommendations of the committee. In the biography of Gowon, Eliagwu notes, "The Dina Report was rejected by the states essentially because of its political assumptions.... Gowon did not raise dust over the issue, but quietly implemented most aspects of this report through the back door."²¹ Given the fact that it had assumed full responsibility for

financing prisons, public safety, and scientific and industrial research, the federal government control of higher education seemed unstoppable.

Gowon's determination to remake Nigeria into a unitary state was reflected in two successive decrees that stripped the states of their financial autonomy. Before the military took over in 1966, as many studies have shown, the regions played a dominant role in their respective areas, especially in finances and education.²² Decree No. 13 of 1970 allocated majority of federally collected revenue to the federal government which in turn allocated to states based on need, often measured by population. The derivation principle that characterized revenue-sharing in Nigeria since the 1950s was suspended. In 1971, the federal government further promulgated Decree No. 9, which transferred rents and royalties of offshore petroleum mines from the states to the federal government.²³ The federal government now had massive resources at its disposal, resources that would enable it to play a much more decisive and influential role in the country's social and economic policies.

Quite notably, the increase in the number of states to twelve weakened the powers of the states relative to the federal government. Many of the states became increasingly dependent on grants from the federal government for such basic needs as administration, a situation that continued when Murtala Mohammed regime created seven more states in 1976.²⁴ The states were in no strong financial position to resist the federal government's encroachment. Cash-strapped, some states often sought federal takeover of some of their responsibilities, as demonstrated in 1973 when the East Central State and Mid-West State requested the federal government to take over their universities.²⁵ Gowon's march to centralization was on course. In a speech in 1972, he declared his support for

a planned and conscientious national plan for university development ... since the states are not financially strong enough to finance their universities, and since the ability of the federal government, itself, to finance them is not always taken into account in planning new universities.²⁶

Gowon took his first major step towards federal control of university education in 1972 when he suspended the constitutional provision with respect

to higher education. He announced the decision of the Supreme Military Council to assume “full responsibility for higher education throughout the country,” further stating that “education, other than higher education, should become the concurrent responsibility of both the Federal and the State Governments, and be transferred to the concurrent legislative list.”²⁷ This change placed higher education on the Exclusive Legislative List. It was a significant amendment of the 1963 Constitution. The 1963 constitution had placed higher education on the Concurrent Legislative List, which granted power to both the federal and regional governments to legislate on higher education matters. It also placed primary and secondary education on the Residual List category, which meant that only the regional governments could legislate on them. The 1972 declaration reversed this. By implication, the federal government arrogated to itself the sole right to establish universities and to legislate on all matters concerning their further expansion. This step, dictated by regional bickering that led to the civil war, paved the way for the future centralization and nationalization of the university system in line with the federal government commitment to foster national unity. As Eke states, “instead of remaining the parochial or regional subject it had previously been, education is now a matter of immense national consequence to all the citizens of Nigeria.”²⁸

Nigeria’s postwar national goals as outlined in the Second NDP was based on building national unity, a strong and self-reliant nation and democratic society with a dynamic economy and equal opportunity for all citizens.²⁹ Since the federal government acknowledged education as fundamental in realizing those objectives, there was therefore the need for a national philosophy and policy on education. *The Seminar on a National Policy on Education* (SNPE) provided that. On the directive of the federal government, and mainly based on the report of the proceedings of *National Curriculum Conference* (NCC) of 1969, the federal and state ministries of education drafted a new education policy in 1972.³⁰ The National Council on Education (NCE), a council of commissioners of education, considered the draft at its meeting in December 1972 and proposed a national seminar where Nigerian educators and other interested and knowledgeable persons would discuss it. NCE appointed the then head of the National Universities Commission (NUC) and a former Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations, S.O. Adebo, to chair the SNPE.³¹ Gowon was the

first Nigerian leader to involve Nigerians on a massive scale in the design of future educational programs, as shown in the number of people who participated in the 1969 Curriculum Conference as well as the 1973 SNPE. This contrasted sharply with the 1960 Ashby Commission, where only three Nigerians participated in its deliberations. The large section of the Nigerian population invited for these conferences was part of Gowon's public relations campaign to win popular acceptance of his regime while at the same time involving the end-users of university products in curriculum development as a means of meeting society's needs.

Addressing regional imbalance in education and using mass education to promote national unity was a compelling need for government for which the seminar must respond. As Adebo put it, "Imbalance in educational opportunities results in imbalance in economic opportunities which in turn adversely affects our national unity with the consequences that we all know. Surely, the time has come to deal firmly with this problem, and to give all it takes in financial and other terms to solve it."³² Among the issues discussed at the seminar were university ownership and centralization, control and administration of educational institutions and democratization of education in order to correct imbalances. The report of the seminar provided the philosophy that guided educational development throughout the 1970s, and, in many instances, beyond. It defined Nigeria's national purpose in the context of the role of education in helping to build and nurture the nation and recommended the expansion, centralization, and democratization of access to university education in order to promote national unity and economic development. It suggested that the "goal of free university education must always be kept in view." The objectives of Nigerian higher education, as the seminar articulated, include the acquisition, development, and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for the survival of the individual and society, the development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environment, the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to develop into useful member of the community, and the acquisition of a detached view of the local and external environment.³³ The report restated and endorsed the five main ingredients of the Second NDP, which included, among others, the fostering of "a land of bright and full opportunities for its citizens." Addressing the issue of disunity and rivalry,

and echoing the 1972 UNESCO report, the seminar declared that education should promote “learning to live, not simply learning to pass examinations,” and to “develop in our youths a sense of unity, patriotism, and love of our country.”³⁴ Above all, it advised the government to ensure a geographically equitable distribution of university facilities as a means of achieving national unity.³⁵

The idea to employ university education to achieve national unity seemed cogent, especially after the experience of the civil war. If Nigerian youth – presumed to be future leaders – from various ethnicities received equal access to all Nigerian universities, every ethnic group would feel confident that it would have equal access to the national wealth. Besides, this would provide the youth a good opportunity to understand one another and build up friendships. Furthermore, if students learned about one another’s culture and lived in areas outside their home states, they would most likely become broad-minded and tolerant. This reasoning motivated the federal government to establish Unity Schools (federally owned high schools) and introduce the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973. The Unity Schools were designed to bring young adolescents of diverse ethnicity together to interact and grow up together in order to create a solid foundation for national unity. For the first time in Nigerian educational history, the government used the quota system of admission into these federal schools. The aim was to correct the educational imbalance between the South and the North by generating enough candidates for university admission, especially from the disadvantaged states. Similarly, the introduction of the NYSC compelled Nigerian university graduates under the age of thirty years to provide a twelve-month period of continuous service outside their home state. No Nigerian graduate was offered a job in the public sector without completing this national service. The government planned the program to expose graduates to the modes of living of the people in different parts of the country with a view of removing prejudices, eliminating ignorance, and confirming at first hand the many similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups.

Realigning the country’s universities as an agent of nation-building, as SNPE outlined, became the slogan of the administration. After what Gowon described as “the widest consultations” with various governmental and non-governmental institutions on the SNPE’s report, the federal

government accepted the recommendations in November 1973 while it finalized discussions on the ambitious projects that would be included in the next plan: the Third National Development Plan (Third NDP).³⁶ Luckily, however, the country's unexpected economic boom of 1973–74, occasioned by the Yom Kippur War, which began on 6 October 1973 in the Middle East, boosted the government's ability to engage in far-reaching university expansion. Although Nigeria had made appreciable income from oil since 1970 when it joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), oil only became the country's major foreign exchange earner and contributor to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with the 1973 war.³⁷

With enormous financial resources from oil revenue at its disposal, the federal government launched the Third NDP in 1975, which outlined grand plans to expand agriculture, industry, transport, housing, water supplies, health facilities, education, rural electrification, community development, and state programs. The impact of oil wealth was clear. While the First NDP and the Second NDP allocated a capital expenditure of ₦2.2 billion and ₦3.0 billion respectively, the Third NDP earmarked an expenditure of ₦30 billion.³⁸ The potential expansion of the productive base of the economy required skilled labour to staff the expanding economy, placing university education at the centre of accomplishing government objectives. The objectives of the university educational program for the Third NDP period were “to expand facilities for education aimed at equalizing individual access to education throughout the country ... to consolidate and develop the nation's system of education in response to the economy's manpower needs [and] ... to make an impact in the area of technological education.”³⁹ In pursuit of these objectives, the plan expressed its resolve to expand facilities in the existing universities, establish four new universities, and increase student enrolment from its current level of 23,000 to 53,000 by 1980. To that end, it allocated a total capital expenditure of ₦251.856 million to education.⁴⁰

The Third NDP was a bold step in the government effort to accelerate the pace of economic and social change in Nigeria. It represents, as Gowon argued, “a major milestone in the evolution of economic planning in this country. It is undoubtedly the most ambitious development effort ever attempted in Nigeria.”⁴¹ Gowon was optimistic that the “full implementation of the plan should ensure a radical transformation of the Nigerian

society.”⁴² Economic development and nation-building were at the centre of Gowon’s plan to revitalize the universities. This vision of universities, as Gowon stressed, “reflect not only the considerably increased resources now available to us but also the government’s determination to translate the country’s vast potential into a permanent improvement in the living condition of all Nigerians.”⁴³ Since the oil wealth coincided with domestic pressure for university expansion, the federal government seized the moment to engage in unprecedented expansion of access, designed not only to provide a workforce to manage the expanding economy, but also to assuage regional, state, and ethnic demands.

Following Gowon’s centralization posture and empowered by the country’s oil wealth, the federal government took over all the state universities (Benin, Ife, and Zaria) in August 1975. Though the Third NDP approved the establishment of four universities, the federal government established seven in 1975. The new universities were deliberately sited in the so-called disadvantaged states, five in the North (Jos, Ilorin, Sokoto, Kano, and Maiduguri) and two among the minorities in the South (Port Harcourt and Calabar).⁴⁴ With thirteen universities under federal control, financial allocations to universities increased, now administered by the newly reconstituted NUC. The federal government had recomposed the NUC by Decree No. 1 of 1974 and extended its powers to ensure ordered control and expansion. The NUC, as previously constituted, was unable to perform its role properly because higher education was a joint responsibility of both state and federal governments. Since the federal government assumed full responsibility for higher education, NUC became the government’s instrument for executing its vision of a centrally coordinated university system. The new NUC was empowered to draw “periodic master plans for the balanced and coordinated development of universities in Nigeria ... [and the] establishment and location of new universities as and when considered necessary.” More importantly, the NUC was required to advise the government on the “financial needs, both recurrent and capital, of university education in Nigeria” as well as to receive block grants from the government for allocation to the universities “in accordance with such formula as may be laid down by the Federal Executive Council.”⁴⁵

In keeping with its expansionist policy, the total budget for universities, put at ₦39 million in 1970/71, increased to ₦320 million in 1976,

leading to expansion of facilities and higher student enrolment. Student enrolment rose from 14,468 in the 1970/71 session to 40,552 in 1976.⁴⁶ This development, as Alex Gboyega and Yinka Atoyebi noted, “marked the decisive turning point when university education became available to the masses in Nigeria.”⁴⁷ However, enrolment would have greatly increased if the federal government had redirected the capital grants meant for the new universities to expand facilities in the existing universities as IUC advised in 1970. Political considerations, more than sustainable expansion of access, dictated the founding of the new institutions. The federal control of universities and equitable geographical distribution aimed at appeasing the educationally disadvantaged states. As J.F. Ade Ayayi and others observed, “It was the oil revenues that incited the federal government to create not only a national system of higher education, but also education as a whole, under the federal control as a factor of reconciliation and unification after the civil war.”⁴⁸ There was little consideration of the long-term maintenance of those institutions. Besides, despite Gowon’s efforts to ‘massify’ university education, admission problems continued to slow down enrolment and expansion of university education.

Quota System and Admission Reform

The demand by northerners for a quota system that would guarantee access to university education for their indigenes was well known.⁴⁹ The question of quotas was not new in the 1970s. It originated in the 1950s when the North advocated for an admission policy that would promote increased admission of its residents in the University College, Ibadan. However, the IUC had firmly opposed it and insisted that academic merit was the sole criterion for university admission. The federal government’s white paper on the Ashby Commission report reaffirmed IUC’s position in 1961. Thus, throughout the 1960s, students secured admission to universities based on academic merit alone, which favoured the more educationally advanced South. In the early 1970s, the northern states intensified their call for some sort of quota system to reserve admission spots for their residents in the existing universities. For instance, the former military governors of the northern states under the platform of Interim Common Services

Agency (ICSA) wrote to Gowon in September 1971, drawing attention to the fact that students from the northern states constituted less than 2 per cent of the total student population in the federal universities of Ibadan and Lagos. They asked the federal government to expand the preliminary courses in these universities and to give preference to students from the North in university admissions.⁵⁰ Given the bitter experience of civil war, the government began to reconsider its thinking on the merits of a quota system, naturally provoking a great deal of discussion and debate.

Because employment opportunities in Nigeria were few and highly competitive, the South, with higher educational and professional attainment, occupied most of the available jobs. In a public address at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in 1972 Gowon had expressed his administration's commitment to "tackle and settle, if possible, once and for all a number of vital and controversial issues among which are the question of educational imbalance and the quota system of admission."⁵¹ Gowon noted, however, that a long-term sustainable approach to overcome the educational imbalance was not through a quota system of admission into universities but through strengthening primary and secondary school education in the affected states in the North. According to Gowon, if that approach were taken, the states would over time produce enough qualified candidates for university admissions and job opportunities.⁵²

Equity was the key to national unity, and Gowon recognized this. Despite his disapproval of the quota system, he admitted that in the interest of national unity a short-term solution was crucial. He affirmed that the "fears and anxieties of these relatively educationally backward areas are genuine and it would be irrational to dismiss those fears and anxieties as unfounded."⁵³ Gowon was from the North and was sympathetic to the plight of the educationally disadvantaged northern states. Yet, given that the South would perceive a quota system as discriminatory and that it would create national tension, Gowon was cautious. Still for the affected states, as Gowon noted, "unless they are able to provide enough graduates of their ethnic or state origin now, they will be denied what they regard as an equitable share of employment opportunities in the country."⁵⁴ As far as those states were concerned, "they are not unduly interested in the long-term solution; they want immediate solution and answers."⁵⁵ Because individual universities controlled admissions, Gowon could not effect

immediate changes but rather cautioned them “to do a lot more than they are doing at present to reflect the federal structure of this country in their student admission.” He also warned that if they fail “we have to accept that the quota system would be the only method that will provide some opportunities for the educationally backward areas to be represented in the universities.”⁵⁶

The incidence of multiple admissions that plagued the university system in Nigeria not only further dimmed admission prospects of northerners but also undermined the federal government’s goal of mass university education. Since 1948 when UCI was established, there was no central admission body in the country. Individual universities admitted students. The absence of admission coordination into Nigerian universities resulted in multiple admissions with many unfilled spaces in universities. Multiple admissions occurred when students received admission offers from many universities and/or departments in a university. This situation, which began in the 1960s, occurred because individual universities independently operated different admission criteria, advertised separately, and conducted separate admission exercises. To increase their chances of admission, many candidates applied to many universities or to multiple departments within the same university. Top candidates frequently received multiple admission offers from many universities and/or departments, resulting in a multiplicity of admissions. Ultimately, such candidates would accept one admission offer.

The ideal admission practice was that when candidates reject admission offers and inform the university early enough, the affected university would offer admissions to other equally qualified applicants who did not receive initial admission offers due to limited spaces. However, many candidates failed to inform the concerned institutions or did so too late. T.M. Yesufu, the vice-chancellor of the University of Benin, noted that “by the time the universities are aware that their original offers would not be honored it is too late to admit those who would otherwise have accepted and utilized the places available.”⁵⁷ In fact, universities could only ascertain the total number of students who accepted admission after the matriculation exercise. At this point, it would be too late to admit new sets of qualified students. Even after matriculation, some students could still withdraw if they received late admission into faculties or universities of their choice. They would often

accept the first offer because they were unsure of gaining admission to their first choice of university or course.⁵⁸ What deprived many qualified candidates of university admissions each year and prevented the universities from meeting their enrolment targets were incidences of multiple applications, multiple acceptances, uncertainty as to whether a candidate would accept admission offers, and uncertainty as to whether those who accepted admission offers would actually register.

The vice-chancellor of the University of Lagos, Ade Ajayi, drew attention to the incidence of multiple admissions when he highlighted the inability of his university to meet its enrolment target. He revealed that the student enrolment targets for science, engineering, and environmental design in 1976 session were 130, 175, and 70, respectively. In the science, 241 students were offered admission but 78 registered; in engineering, 130 were offered admission but 54 registered; in environmental design, 54 were offered admission but 44 registered.⁵⁹ The deficit was not peculiar to the University of Lagos; it affected all the universities in the country. Altogether, the deficit at Ibadan, Nsukka, Zaria, Ife, Lagos, and Benin was 9.8 per cent in 1970–71; 11.2 per cent in 1971–72; 13.8 per cent in 1972–73; 11.8 per cent in 1973–74; 8.0 per cent in 1974–75; and 6.9 per cent in 1975–76.⁶⁰

Applicants from the South benefited and at the same time suffered from the incidence of multiple admissions. Because they were often the most qualified, they secured placement in many universities but at the same time obstructed others who were on the margin of admission. An analysis of the distribution of candidates admitted into two or more universities in the 1974/75 session revealed that, out of the 766 candidates offered two or more admissions, most (31%) came from the Western State, followed by the East-Central State (23.12%), and the Mid-Western State (16.71%), all in the South.⁶¹ Thus, southern candidates, who had maintained a lead in university population, accounted for more than 70 per cent of multiple admissions. Any meaningful explanation of this, according to Aderinto, “will have to do with intense determination of the candidates from the southern states to obtain university education. To them, a university degree was an ‘International meal ticket.’”⁶²

To address the admissions problem, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors in 1974 set up a panel of two experts, comprised of L.R. Kay, Secretary,

Universities Central Council on Admissions of the United Kingdom, and W.H. Pettipiere of the Ontario Universities Applications Centre of Canada. The report submitted by the two experts on 31 May 1975 recommended the setting up of a central admission board to coordinate admission to all Nigerian universities.⁶³ However, the CVC did not implement this proposal. By asking the two experts to make recommendations “without prejudice to existing individual standards and traditions of the various universities,” it was apparent that the CVC preferred to preserve the universities’ power to admit their own students. Thus, according to B.A. Salim, when the experts recommended a central admission system, it “touched on a sore side [which universities] saw as a breach of that fundamental clause which sought to preserve the status quo (University Autonomy on Admissions).”⁶⁴ In addition, since the study and the recommendation of the expatriate committee was a non-governmental affair, the federal government was not compelled to order the CVC or, more appropriately, the NUC, to implement the proposal.

The federal government was displeased with the admission practices of universities. As expressed in the Third NDP, it blamed the universities for adhering “too rigidly to restrictive admission policies which in the light of current realities are overdue for a drastic revision.”⁶⁵ In a speech at the formal inauguration of the newly reconstituted NUC on 10 July 1975, Gowon reinstated the government’s intention to direct education admission to serve the mission of nation-building. According to him,

The Government is determined to boost the educational opportunities of every Nigerian. Education will be made to respond to the needs and the aspirations of the nation and its people. In the field of Higher Education in particular, the tremendous increase in opportunities will have to be accompanied by a realistic reappraisal of entry qualifications into our Universities so as to render these increased opportunities for University education accessible to a greater number of aspiring Nigerians.⁶⁶

As it prepared to address the admission issue, Murtala Mohammed, a northerner, overthrew Gowon’s administration on 29 July 1975 in a military coup. Mohammed accused Gowon’s administration of corruption

and indefinite postponement of earlier plans to hand over government to a civilian regime in 1976. To justify his intervention, Murtala blamed past leadership that “either by design or default, had become too insensitive to the true feelings and yearnings of the people.”⁶⁷ In order to satisfy what he perceived as the true yearnings of Nigerians, Murtala immediately set 1979 as the deadline to hand over control to a civilian government. In addition, he created seven states in February 1976, bringing the total number of states to nineteen.⁶⁸ Murtala was convinced that the creation of more states in Nigeria would enhance the country’s future political stability. In a way, the politics of the state creation was analogous to the demand for more universities. Both were made often to maximize the opportunities of partaking in sharing the country’s wealth controlled by the federal government. One way to guarantee this was for states to train their own high-level workforce at the university level. Since universities existed in twelve out of the nineteen states, the seven remaining states were bound to demand their own universities, for, as the Inter-University Council observed, “The cohesion of the Nigerian State depends on Lagos [the seat of power] listening to these voices.”⁶⁹

As anticipated, Mohammed’s regime took up the admission issue that Gowon initiated. For instance, during the 1974/75 academic year, the northern states with more than 50 per cent of the country’s total population, accounted for only 5,764 or just fewer than 22 per cent of the national total university residents of 26,448.⁷⁰ This unequal access to university education made the northerners uncomfortable because university education was perceived to confer greater benefits on the recipients and greater access to national resources or ‘cake’ by Nigerian ethnic groups. According to T.M. Yesufu, “A federal or confederal country, in which some sections feel inferior and dominated because of educational imbalances, tends to be inherently unstable. Equal educational opportunity tends to ensure equal employment opportunities.”⁷¹ The advantage of equal educational opportunity was that

it develops and diffuses unifying cultural and social traits, a sense of intellectual camaraderie and mutual complementarity; it promotes identity of perspectives and interests with regard to national issues; promotes mutual personal and group

understanding, a sense of equality and justice; and creates [a] bond of national unity.⁷²

Once in power, Mohammed quickly set up the Committee on University Entrance (CUE), headed by M.S. Angulu in December 1975.⁷³ He charged the committee to study the problems of admission and make recommendations on how to remove “all the bottlenecks limiting entry,” promote the “liberalization of admissions,” and to review the entry requirements of the various universities in order to ensure uniformity.⁷⁴ This was the first time that the federal government had backed a reform of university admission since 1960. The terms of reference of the CUE reflected the urgency and seriousness of the problem of multiple admissions. Besides, it highlighted the federal government’s willingness to liberalize admissions for the sake of regional equality and mass access. Although Mohammed’s regime ended on 13 February 1976 when Lt. Col. B.S. Dimka assassinated him in an abortive coup, Olusegun Obasanjo, a southerner who replaced him, promised to continue with his programs amid concerns from northerners.

Uncertain about the step the new southern head of state would take to close the educational gap between the North and the South, northern states increased their pressure on the federal government to take action in reforming the admission process. One of the most ardent lobbyists was Jubril Aminu, a northerner, who was the executive secretary of National Universities Commission and a member of the CUE. Aminu used his influential position to agitate vigorously for equal representation of all ethnic groups in the existing universities. In a fifty-three-page paper that he addressed to the federal government, Aminu lamented:

The four old states of East Central, Lagos, Midwest and West exercise an alarming monopoly of enrolment into the University system. These four states, with a combined population of about one third of the whole country, have for long had a disproportionate advantage in higher education. Even recently, in the 6 old Universities the four states had 75.6 per cent, 71.4 per cent, 72.9 per cent, 68.3 per cent and 69.4 per cent of the enrolments in the academic years 1970/71, 72/72, 72/73, 73/74, 74/75, respectively.⁷⁵

Southern states, as Aminu noted, also dominated student population in science courses. He showed that the four old states located in the South dominated 80 per cent of the enrolment in medicine and pharmacy, 77 per cent in engineering and technology, 75 per cent in pure science and agriculture and forestry, as well as 75 per cent in education, 60 per cent in law, and 56 per cent in public administration in the year 1974/75 session. Based on these statistics, Aminu declared that, in relation to their population, the northern states suffered most. He warned that the future of Nigeria rested in the hands of southern states “since they have enjoyed a long monopoly of highly skilled manpower development in all disciplines, and since the situation is not improving.”⁷⁶ Aminu insisted that the criteria for university admission “must only be uniformly applied if they are fair and just from first principles; namely, if all started the competition from the same line.”⁷⁷ Even though Gowon established all the seven new universities in the educationally disadvantaged states, Aminu noted that “this action by itself would never solve the problem of imbalance without concomitant changes in the admission policies.”⁷⁸

To increase the opportunities and the eligibility of the students from the underprivileged areas, Aminu suggested, among other things, that the federal government should introduce “the system of quota admission.” In addition, he insisted on “a sixty per cent quota admission for the twelve states, on population basis into the new universities; and fifty per cent quota admission for the twelve states, on population basis, into the existing universities.”⁷⁹ Additionally, he requested that the government establish the urgently needed remedial centres in all the ten disadvantaged states of the former North, as well as Rivers and Cross Rivers states. While he urged the federal government to take responsibility for the entire financial burden of establishing these centres, he stressed that the centres should be under the complete control of the state governments, including the admission policies. The federal government, Aminu advised, should approve these proposals in order to lay a solid foundation “for unity and for contentment” among Nigerians by removing “all sources of strife – imminent or potential.”⁸⁰ In carrying out this task, Aminu stated that the federal government “needs to offer no apologies, and the Committee on University Entrance needs to have no hesitations in recommending.”⁸¹

Aminu was an influential advocate of admission reform. In 1976, following some of the recommendations contained in his letter, the federal government announced the establishment of schools of Basic Studies in each of the ten states in the North (with the exception of Kwara), and the two states in the South considered educationally disadvantaged. The federal government financed each school, but states controlled them, including the admission policy. Each school, affiliated to the six older universities, was to prepare its students for admission to the universities. Although the federal government did not approve a quota system, it directed each of the six older universities to guarantee admission to the successful graduates of each school of Basic Studies affiliated with it. By implication, candidates from the remaining states would be considered on merit for whatever vacancies might exist thereafter. The federal government further directed each of the seven new universities to establish a remedial course within its system for students from the same disadvantaged states who might be deficient in some of the general or special university entry requirements. It insisted that students admitted to such courses would matriculate into the university straight away and any vacancies left after admission should go to candidates from the remaining states.⁸²

Presumably influenced by Aminu's campaign, the head of state, Obasanjo, summoned a special meeting with the Committee of Vice Chancellors and officials of the NUC on 18 September 1976.⁸³ At the meeting, the head of state addressed, among others, the issues of admission into Nigerian universities, especially as it affected candidates from the educationally disadvantaged areas of the country and low enrolments in science disciplines.⁸⁴ Obasanjo bluntly blamed Nigerian universities for maintaining aristocratic seclusion and remoteness from the society they were meant to serve, a fact he considered "a big constraint in the expansion programme of all our universities because all other universities tended to follow the example of the University of Ibadan."⁸⁵ He cautioned that, since the federal government had committed large sums of money to the universities, it expected them to "reflect the true Nigerian character both in their intake, the content of the courses offered, and their physical environment."⁸⁶

Comments such as these fuelled the fear that the federal government desired to impose a quota system in university admission. The federal commissioner for education denied it. As he stressed, instead of introducing a

quota system, it was the desire of the federal government to see “a more pragmatic formula for admission into our universities that will reflect the federal nature of this country and that will redress the chronic imbalance without necessarily reducing standards. I must say categorically that no quota system is envisaged.”⁸⁷ The commissioner also pointed out that the government had established schools of basic studies to remedy the imbalance in the availability of qualified students for admissions. Apparently, the commissioner was diplomatic in his appraisal of the situation. It was, in a sense, unlikely for the universities to produce a “more pragmatic formula” to admit students without fundamentally changing the prevailing admission system based on merit. Yet, because southerners who had resisted quota policy controlled administrative positions in most universities, and because individual universities controlled admission, they were prepared to sabotage the implementation of a quota system. Aminu recognized this factor when he stated that “Senates [responsible for admission] are very conservative bodies which jealously guard what they call university autonomy and academic freedom. But neither of these can over-ride national unity and harmony.”⁸⁸ Tactically, the government favoured the setting up of a central examination body as a prelude to the eventual imposition of a quota system. Under this arrangement, the power of universities to admit would be constrained by the new body controlled by the federal government. Concerned that the establishment of a central admission body would strip them of their power to select their students, the CVC requested the government to give them the opportunity to comment on the awaited report of the University Entrance Committee before approving it.⁸⁹

While awaiting the report on admission reform, Obasanjo’s administration announced some radical university education policies that aimed at not only closing the educational gap between the North and the South but also facilitating mass university education. In his speech at the convocation ceremony of the University of Ibadan on 17 November 1976, Gowon announced his government’s decision to make university education, including technical secondary school and post-secondary school, tuition-free and boarding-free; subsidising students’ cost of food by 50 per cent. Obasanjo had launched the Universal Primary Education Scheme (UPE) on 2 September 1976, which made primary education free and compulsory in the country. Extending free education to post-primary and post-secondary education

was revolutionary and unprecedented. With the increase in the number of universities as well as free tuition, Obasanjo believed that

more Nigerians will continue to have the benefit of higher education until a stage was reached where no section of this country would find itself on the defensive in the quest for and attainment of knowledge.⁹⁰

Following the recommendation of the Committee on University Entrance (CUE), which submitted its report in 1977, the federal government moved swiftly to establish a central admission body.⁹¹ Since the deliberations of the CUE were spiced with a lot of rancour caused by the contentious issue of using a quota system, the committee avoided making a recommendation on that subject. Instead, it recommended the introduction of remedial programs for the educationally less-developed states. In February 1977, the commissioner of education summoned a meeting of the CVC and NUC during which he announced the setting up of a single body to embrace the functions of the two bodies that CUE had proposed. It was named the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), and Professor O.O. Akinkugbe and M.S. Angulu were appointed chairperson and registrar of the board, respectively.⁹²

With the creation of JAMB, admission to the universities became centralized and nationalized. Henceforth, students were to gain admission through either the University Matriculation Examination (UME) or Direct Entry. UME was open to those who possessed a School Certificate/WASC with five credits obtained at not more than two sittings, including English language for arts subject students and mathematics for science subject students. It was also open to teachers with grade II certificates with a minimum of five credits, and candidates who did not possess these requirements but had registered for the November/December 1977 GCE 'O' Level or June 1978 SC/GCE. Such candidates, who would have to await the outcome of their performance on these exams, would be eligible for university admission if they ultimately fulfilled the conditions stated above. For direct entry admission, candidates were expected to possess a General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'A' Level in at least two subjects relevant to the intended course of study; National Certificate of Education (NCE)

for courses in education; International Baccalaureate; and the Interim Joint Matriculation (IJMB) conducted by Ahmadu Bello University.⁹³

JAMB was founded to ease access to university education, but soon it became a source of tension between the North and the South. Empowered by Decree No. 2 of 1978 to “control of the conduct of matriculation examinations for admissions into all Universities in Nigeria [and determine] matriculation requirements and conducting examinations,” JAMB conducted its first UME in 1978.⁹⁴ Although the heads of each university were members of the board, they resisted it. The CVC at the special meeting with the head of state in September 1976 had requested to have the opportunity to make an input on the recommendations of the CUE before government’s approval. On the contrary, the federal government went ahead to announce the establishment of JAMB in 1977. Feeling slighted, and given that the CVC had rejected the recommendations for a central admission body in 1974 by two experts, the university vice-chancellors, dominated by southerners, opposed JAMB. “To the universities,” according to Salim, “the Board was government’s tool for reduction of the universities autonomy and bringing in the quota system through the back door.”⁹⁵

Opposition to JAMB intensified when it released the first UME results in April 1978. In the conduct of its first exams, JAMB recorded many administrative difficulties. The UME was conducted in one day, and many candidates missed the exam due to poor organization and communication. Under the caption “Thousands did not sit for JAMB,” the *Nigerian Tribune* noted that a good number of candidates missed the examinations because of the late arrival of the examinations papers, noting that most of the centres marked for the examinations were non-existent.⁹⁶ As it was a yearly exam, candidates who missed or failed the exam would have to wait for one year before retaking it. These administrative lapses rendered the exam ‘chaotic,’ as the first JAMB Registrar, Angulu, later admitted, and prevented many students from gaining admissions in the 1978/79 session.⁹⁷ This raised questions about the ability of the new board to handle entrance exams successfully. The *New Nigerian* editorials consistently called for a review of the JAMB decree to transform it into a clearinghouse to avoid multiple admissions.⁹⁸ Blaming the problem on the haste with which the board was established, Adeyemo Aderinto argued: “If there is any lesson to be learnt from the JAMB episode, it is the fact that setting up ill-prepared,

ill-designed super-structures, however well intentioned, would not achieve the perceived objectives.”⁹⁹

Worse still was the fact that the educationally disadvantaged states realized to their dismay that the board did not make much difference to their admission prospects. Of the 113,162 candidates who applied for admission in the 1978/79 session, fewer than 20,000 candidates came from the ten northern states.¹⁰⁰ In spite of the population of the North, this number was small when compared with the total number of applications received. While only 2,776 students from the North gained admission, 11,641 students from the South were successful.¹⁰¹ The affected states blamed the board for admitting fewer students from their region. But according to JAMB registrar, the operation of JAMB in its first year did not affect the “disadvantaged states more adversely than in the past as has been alleged.” In fact, he showed that the number of candidates who gained admission during this period was an improvement from the past.¹⁰²

The JAMB-generated tension continued to affect ethnic relations. Students in the northern universities who had hoped to secure automatic admissions to universities after their preliminary studies were disappointed because universities followed JAMB guidelines (merit) in offering admission. An admission crisis in the University of Jos highlights this issue. In the university, Professor G.O. Onuaguluchi, a southerner and the vice-chancellor of the university failed to carry out the decision of the university council that required him to admit students from the educationally disadvantaged states who satisfy minimum requirement and fill the remaining vacancies on merit.¹⁰³ A commission of enquiry on the 1977/78 admissions exercise condemned the admission committee for using a higher pass mark in JAMB to eliminate candidates from the disadvantaged states. Although the federal government meant well when it initiated this discriminatory policy in 1976, it lost sight of the legitimate claims and aspirations of students from other states.¹⁰⁴

Disappointed with JAMB, students from the North blamed southerners, embarked on violent protest, and demanded the abolition of the board in February 1979. This resulted in the closure of all the universities in the North. As reported by *West Africa*, the JAMB debate divided Nigerian students along ethnic lines, with southerners favouring JAMB and northerners determined to wipe it out. According to the paper, the southern

press soon attacked “the demonstrating students, and [supported] the principle that university admissions be based only on exam-proven academic achievement (which they still dub ‘merit’) – a principle that will obviously favor the better resourced South.”¹⁰⁵ The controversy that marked JAMB’s first exam threatened to undermine the nation-building agenda for which the body was established.

Recession of 1978

The federal government had attempted to address the issues affecting the expansion of university education by establishing more institutions, spreading the institutions evenly in the country, providing free university education, and establishing a central admission body. With the drastic decline in oil revenue in 1978, the government could not fulfill its liberal education policies. Since oil revenue accounted for over 93 per cent of Nigeria’s revenue and over 95 per cent of its foreign exchange, the decline affected the country’s GDP, which declined by 5.7 per cent.¹⁰⁶ In his 1978 budget speech, Obasanjo noted that “although petroleum remained the greatest contributor to the economy, its share in the national income declined slightly. [Therefore] ... the 1977/78 Budget had to be a strict one both in terms of government having to cut down its programmes and also in terms of sacrifices which were being demanded from all Nigerians.”¹⁰⁷

While the oil boom had fuelled university expansion policies, the 1977 decline in oil revenue led to policy reversal. Consequently, the federal government introduced austerity measures while it borrowed Nigeria’s first huge loan of US\$1 billion from the international capital market.¹⁰⁸ The impact of the government’s belt-tightening measures on financing social services, including the universities, was immediate; government reduced subventions to universities and reintroduced some fees to enable universities to generate revenue. It revised hostel accommodation charges upwards at ₦90.00 per session of thirty-six weeks or ₦30.00 in a session of three terms and the feeding fees upwards from 50 Kobo per day to ₦1.50 per student per day (for three meals).¹⁰⁹ Although the federal government introduced these fees in order to ease its financial burden in funding university education, it was not clear that student fees were really the problem. A

Daily Times editorial noted that fee changes did not address the root of the universities' financial problems, stating that it "did not amount to a clear, consistent, and coherent policy statement on the financing of higher education."¹¹⁰ It further cautioned that, instead of assuming the responsibility of student housing and accommodation, which saddled the government and university authorities with avoidable non-academic problems, they

ought to put some bite into their off-campus policy, so that they become non-residential in the shortest time possible. They need to achieve that objective in order to be able to address themselves to the more important question of how to offer university education to a maximum number of students.¹¹¹

The unintended consequence of proliferation of universities in the 1970s was that these universities constituted a heavy burden on the government's dwindling resources. According to Eniola Adeyeye, the existing thirteen universities involved separate and financially demanding administrative structures and personnel. He wondered why the federal government had not established fewer universities "with expanded facilities including scattered colleges all over the country such that a single university, like the University of Cairo could graduate annually tens of thousands of much needed graduates to man key posts in all the sectors of the economy."¹¹² Conversely, Jubril Aminu, the executive secretary of the NUC, defended the government's position on expansion. For him, "those who criticize the establishment of more universities will do well to find out the views of the large, usually silent, majority in the country. If the people want more universities, they are entitled to more universities and they deserve what they get."¹¹³ This thinking is deficient in long-term strategic thinking and reflected, quite disappointingly, the mindset of those who advised the government on university expansion. Even with the establishment of thirteen universities, the total number of students they absorbed remained very low. For instance, in 1977, out of more than 90,000 applicants, only 47,499 secured admissions. Universities, accustomed to receiving massive grants from the federal government, responded to the economic downturn by devising cost-saving measures to survive. For instance, the university

authority at UNN stopped the feeding of students during the 1977/1978 session and introduced a policy of “Pay-As-You-Eat.”¹¹⁴

The NUC even intervened by setting up the Committee on University Finances (CUF) in 1977 to propose restructuring measures for the universities.¹¹⁵ The terms of reference of the CUF recognized the country’s current economic meltdown and the need for the universities to make adjustments. The CUF’s report, submitted in May 1978, showed, among other things, that the rate of growth in student population and the expansion in academic activities out-stripped the rate of development of teaching facilities. It addition, it noted the prevalence of overcrowding in student hostels due to inadequate living accommodations for students; inadequate staff housing forcing the universities to spend too much money on rented accommodation; and inadequate meal subsidies provided for students.¹¹⁶ In a way, these problems affected student enrolment as well as the quality of education obtained in these universities.¹¹⁷ While the committee urged the government to raise the amount of grants to universities, it also warned university administrators not to embark on new capital projects without prior approval from the NUC, cautioning them to build a simpler structure “with greater emphasis on maximum utility at minimum cost.”¹¹⁸ However, the government did not increase subventions to the university, and the hopes of expanding access to universities seemed truncated.

Obasanjo’s abolition of tuition fees and reduction in boarding and lodging charges in 1977 led to sharp increases in student enrolment from 40,552 in 1976 to 47,499 in 1977, and increases in government’s financial commitments to the universities. However, it also led to a huge drop in local revenue in fees generated by the universities from ₦10.4 million to ₦4.7million.¹¹⁹ Faced with a decline in oil revenue, financial grants to the universities declined, and the deficit in NUC recommendations and actual grants to universities in 1977/78 session was over ₦24 million.¹²⁰ As a result the “physical facilities [were not] developed at a sufficiently rapid rate to meet the demands for university places.”¹²¹ Due to inadequate accommodations, congestion and squalor worsened in Nigerian universities with the accompanying social problems.

Unable to provide adequate funds for universities and aggravated by the poor living conditions of university students, the Obasanjo government attempted to reintroduce tuition fees and hike boarding and lodging

fees. These policies were unpopular, forcing universities to emerge “as centers of vigorous protest and often violent confrontation against the authorities.”¹²² In May 1978, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) embarked on a violent, massive protest. The federal government immediately closed down all the universities, banned NUNS, and expelled its president, Segun Okeowo, together with other student leaders.¹²³ Two vice-chancellors of the most affected universities, Professor Iya Abubakar of ABU and Professor J.F. Ade Ajayi of the University of Lagos, were relieved of their positions. The stage was now set for a showdown between the military and university intelligentsias. More notably, the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT), a hitherto conservative association that emerged in 1965, metamorphosed into a formidable opposition group, renamed Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 1978. Henceforth, ASUU assumed a leadership position in the struggle against Obasanjo’s harsh social policies and those of future regimes.¹²⁴ ASUU appearance seemed timely because it was

the period of the beginning of the decline in the oil boom, when the country faced the consequences of the failure by its rulers to use the oil wealth to generate production and a social welfare system. Military dictatorship had eroded deeply the basic freedoms in the society. Academic freedom and university autonomy were casualties of military dictatorship. The funding of education, and so of universities, became poorer. The factors required a changed orientation of the union of academics, from 1980.¹²⁵

Conclusion

The military administrations of Gowon, Mohammed, and Obasanjo adopted a federal system of higher education in the 1970s primarily due to the centralized organization of the military, the strong financial strength of the federal government, and the need for forge national unity and development. Using education to foster a united nation was tricky in Nigeria, as it was in other pluralistic African societies. Remi Clignet’s study of

educational development in postcolonial Camerouns, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast shows that although education acted as an important agent of social change it did not eradicate traditional ethnic tensions.¹²⁶ Studies on Nigeria have shown that education could exacerbate existing tensions by producing disproportionate rewards among groups.¹²⁷ In a sense, such an experiment was “a two-edged sword cutting either for or against national integration.”¹²⁸ For Nigeria, the goal of nation-building through federal university control and management seemed unsustainable, as mounting criticism continued. This is because, according to Nwuzor, the federal government policy was an “ad hoc measure necessitated by circumstances and military action.”¹²⁹

Federal agencies such as JAMB and NUC naturally came under attack from the universities, not only as symbols of federal government inefficiency, but also as agents of discrimination and suppression. NUC was perceived as a body that arrogated authority over universities.¹³⁰ In fact, in the wake of the Mohammed Commission following university students’ unrest in May 1978, a number of university officials assaulted NUC staff for encroaching on their autonomy. Despite the unprecedented expansion of access to university education in the 1970s, the goal of nation-building and economic development remained farfetched, as policies were often viewed from ethnic/regional lenses. According to Nwuzor,

It is obvious that uniformity, even for balanced development and nation unity, is a very difficult problem in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. Such a policy carries the possibility, as already the case in Nigeria, of being interpreted by some as ‘leveling down’ where the declared intension is to ‘level up.’ Public monopoly of management and control of education without the means to meet demand and a policy of equality for all is another contradiction.¹³¹

While the goal of uniting Nigeria’s pluralistic societies in a collective conscience proved elusive, remarkable achievements were recorded in university expansion. While the number of universities grew from six in 1970 to thirteen in 1979, enrolment surged from 14,468 in the 1970/71 session to 57,742 in the 1979/80 session.¹³² Nonetheless, given Nigeria’s population, estimated at 68 million in 1979, this number was statistically insignificant.

Its significance, however, lay in the fact that while enrolment grew from 1,360 in 1960 to 9,695 in 1969, it jumped to 57,742 in 1979.

Another major turning point in the country's educational development was in 1979 when Obasanjo handed over power to a democratically elected government. The new constitution that came into force removed legislation on higher education from the exclusive legislative list and placed it on the concurrent list. Accordingly, both the federal government and the nineteen states now had equal powers to control higher education. The federal government's monopoly on university education ended. This significant shift in the country's educational experiment had great consequence for the third push for mass university education policies, 1979–83.

