



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

by Ogechi Emmanuel Anyanwu

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The Second Republic and the Burden of Expansion, 1979–83: Free Education, Science and Technology, and the Quota System

Introduction

The 1979 constitution ushered in a new civilian administration called the Second Republic. The constitution introduced a United States-style presidential system to replace of the parliamentary system adopted during the First Republic (1960–66). It also ended the exclusive federal control of university education since 1970. Both federal and state assemblies were now empowered by the constitution to make laws “with respect to the establishment of an institution for purposes of university, professional or technological education.”¹ To facilitate nation-building, the constitution enshrined the principle of federal character based on a quota system in the federal civil service appointments, a system that was later introduced in university admission.² The intention was to prevent domination by one or more states, ethnic groups, or sections at the federal level. Chapter 2, Section 3 of the 1979 constitution adopted quota system (affirmative action) in employment as a principle of state policy. It declared that the composition of the government of the federation and its agencies and operations would

be carried out in a manner as to “reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity.”³ The overall strategy was to use the system “to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.”⁴ Most significantly, the constitution enshrined the doctrine of free education as state policy by undertaking to provide, among other things, free university education “as and when practicable.”⁵

Inspired by the constitutional changes and emboldened by the increased oil revenue of 1979, politicians made free education and educational expansion a crucial point in their campaigns. The five political parties that were registered when the Obasanjo’s military government lifted the ban on political activities in 1978 prioritized education.⁶ Even though the political parties were divided along regional and ethnic lines, they shared a similar commitment to free education. The UPN, led by Awolowo, proposed free education at all levels. It promised to cancel all loans granted to students, abolish all lodging fees for student hostels, and increase the national subsidy for student feeding.⁷ Similarly, the NPN, under Makaman Bida, pledged to eradicate illiteracy throughout Nigeria and promote the learning of science, culture, and qualitative education. Waziri Ibrahim’s GNPP vowed to work towards free and high quality education at all levels. The NPP under Nnamdi Azikiwe made similar declarations on education.⁸ However, none of the parties articulated strategies for financing their ambitious and expensive educational promises. They trusted in the ‘endless flow’ of oil revenue.

On 1 October 1979, Shagari and the nineteen state governors assumed the positions of first executive president of Nigeria and executive governors respectively, marking a new beginning for Nigeria after thirteen years of military dictatorship. Given his party’s emphasis on free and high quality education as well as the country’s desire for social change, Shagari used his first nation-wide broadcast to make a commitment to educational expansion and economic development. Shagari declared that Nigeria needed “more schools, more playing-fields and numerous other supplies and equipment, all of which are involved with the increase in enrolment.”⁹ He noted, however, that the main problem was “how to make education accessible to all, given the ... inadequacy of teachers and educational facilities.”¹⁰ Of

course, much money was required to conduct Shagari's educational agenda. Oil revenue had been unstable since 1975, but, by 1979, the Gulf War between Iran and Iraq led to an increase in Nigeria's revenue. This increase gave Shagari's administration the confidence to pursue its ambitious campaign promises, the most prominent of which included educational expansion and free education.

In keeping with the country's vision of economic development and nation-building, Shagari's administration established seven universities of science and technology, introduced affirmative action policy, initiated the National Open University scheme, and involved the states in educational expansion. This chapter shows that the early 1980s were marked by an accelerated push for mass university education. It argues that central to understanding university education policies in the mid-1980s are the uncertainties of the country's oil revenue, the unrealistic and unsustainable expectations of the masses for free and equal access to higher education, the recklessness with which educational expansion was pursued, and the sudden economic downturn due partly to corruption of governmental officials.

National Open University and Universities of Technology

Since 1960, enrolment in Nigerian universities had been hampered by a combination of factors, including limited facilities to accommodate demand and exclusion of mature students, homemakers, and the handicapped. Following his promise of mass education, President Shagari introduced a bill on National Open University (NOU). The government intended NOU to address these problems. The concept of NOU was, unmistakably, at the centre of massification of university education. It derived from the objectives of making higher education accessible to those denied the opportunity at earlier stages of their lives. The objectives of the NOU, as envisioned by the federal government, were to provide programs, which would be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. Such a university would

run at the degree and post-graduate levels as well as for diploma, certificate, enrichment and refresher courses to meet the needs

of university students who will include working adults willing to combine work with learning, housewives, handicapped persons, and also young men and women who must have minimum qualifications for admissions as determined by the Senate of the University.¹¹

On 1 May 1980, Shagari set up a Presidential Planning Committee on NOU and appointed Professor G.J. Afolabi Ojo to head it. The committee had the task of coming up with proposals on the nature of the university in the “context of Nigerian higher education, the administrative and academic structure of the University, the technical support services, staff establishments, relationships with other universities and related bodies within and outside the country, and also relationships with the mass media.”¹² In its report, the committee suggested that the teaching methodology would be a combination of correspondence materials, radio and television, sound and videotapes suitable for use in transistorized equipment, face-to-face teaching at local study centres, and written assignments.¹³ This approach was intended to reach a much wider audience than the existing traditional universities. However, given the unreliable and poor state of Nigeria’s communication infrastructures, the provision of university education through this medium, particularly when the services were outside the control of the university, was challenging. Ojo hoped that in view of the wide range of teaching techniques to be used by the university, plans would be made to ensure that the university’s dependence on some technical support services was “reasonable, feasible and reliable. Such essential technical support services include printing, radio, television, post and telegraphs, and computer facilities.”¹⁴

Similarly, the unavailability of modern communication equipment in many rural areas was another problem that would affect the coverage of NOU. The vast majority of Nigerians, especially in rural areas, lacked easy access to radios and television sets. The Planning Committee stressed that finding a way to reach those Nigerians was necessary for the success of NOU. The committee therefore recommended that “such media resources should be provided at local study centers where they can be operated with the assistance of technicians and where generators can be used to supply power if and when the supply from the National Electric Power Authority

is unavailable.”¹⁵ The absence of communication infrastructures and steady power supply in most of the rural areas and their unreliability in the urban areas presented serious challenges to the NOU project. One way of overcoming these challenges, which would have been within the powers of NOU, was through the postal system. To deal with the slow or non-delivery of letters and parcels to students of the NOU, the Planning Committee suggested that the NOU should rely on an independent courier system to be managed by the university itself, which would relay learning materials to students. However, this strategy would have inevitably increased the cost of study at the NOU, making it inaccessible to many people. Given these uncertainties, it was not surprising that the Senate turned down the Open University Bill at the second reading on 16 September 1981, even though the House of Representatives had passed it on 16 July 1981.

Although the Senate had vetoed the National Open University Bill, Nigerians continued to mount pressure on the senators to pass it. For instance, a *Daily Times* editorial of 13 December 1982, strongly called on the Senate to pass the Open University Bill to help thousands of young Nigerians who desired opportunities for university education. The paper declared that “Senators as elected representatives of the people cannot afford to kill a bill which will be beneficial to thousands of the electorate.”¹⁶ Although the senate eventually passed the bill, the university did not become operational because in 1984 the new military government suspended it, citing lack of adequate facilities as their major reason.

The infrastructural problems that raised doubts over the wisdom of establishing a NOU highlighted the poor state of science and technology in the country even after years the government pronounced commitment on the subject. Because of the critical role of science and technology in the smooth functioning of the proposed NOU as well as facilitating economic development, Shagari administration moved quickly to pursue his plans to establish seven universities of technology. These universities, he stated, would be located in states without universities. The thirteen existing universities operated in twelve out of the nineteen states, so the federal government proposed to situate the new universities in the seven states without university facilities, i.e., Bauchi, Gongola, Niger, Imo, Ogun, Benue, and Ondo.¹⁷ The idea of locating the proposed universities of technology in these states was designed to foster national unity through fair geographical

spread of university amenities. It was also meant to help champion the drive to scientific and technological advancement of Nigeria's economy. The vice president, Alex Ekwueme, stated that this decision, "while placing prime focus on the development of technologies for the country, will also ensure proper distribution of university institutions and location of a federally operated university in each geo-political state of the country."¹⁸

The government's determination to privilege science and technology was based on the need to train relevant personnel to execute the technologically oriented programs it had embarked upon. Of high priority were projects such as the modernization of agricultural development (dubbed the Green Revolution), steel development, petro-chemical technology, urban and rural electrification, and the development of a new federal capital in Abuja. The workforce required to execute the programs were as follows: engineers, construction and allied trades, 36,820; agriculturalists, scientists, engineers and veterinary surgeons, 12,790; medical and paramedical personnel, 82,366; accountants, 58,185; and legal practitioners, 5,185.¹⁹ To meet the technological human resource needs of the country, the government strongly believed that more specialized universities were needed.

The previous military administrations had made a series of pronouncements supporting science and technology without backing them with relevant policies. Shagari wanted to be different. Following the advice of the acting executive secretary of NUC, Abel Guobadia, the federal government decided to phase the founding of seven universities within a four-year period. The first phase was between 1980 and 1981, when it would set up universities of technology in Bauchi, Benue, and Imo states. While universities in Gongola and Ondo states were planned to emerge during the second phase, 1981/82, the remaining universities would be established in Niger and Ogun states during the third phase, 1982/83.²⁰ To facilitate the immediate opening of these universities, the federal government not only appointed vice-chancellors for the first-phase universities but also requested the NUC to organize a national conference of experts.²¹ Held in December 1980, the conference focused on how to realize the government's vision of producing highly skilled workers in science and technology. In his opening address at the seminar, the vice president noted that the proposed universities were not just "an expansion of university opportunity: they were different from the traditional universities which we [Nigeria] inherited from

our colonial past.”²² Echoing the long-standing government commitment to decolonize higher education by moving away from dependency to real independence, he asked: “How much can ... [Nigeria] afford to depend on the importation of technological goods and expatriate personnel for our building and construction, transportation and communication and other services?”²³ The vice president implied that the new universities of technology would answer that question and besides provide “leadership to industrial and technological development in the country.”²⁴

The report issued at the end of the seminar emphasized the need for the proposed universities to offer academic and professional programs leading to the award of diplomas, first degrees, postgraduate and higher degrees in planning, adaptive, technical, maintenance, developmental and productive skills in the engineering, scientific, agricultural, medical, and allied professional disciplines.²⁵ In addition, the report favoured the introduction of the following major academic programs: Management Sciences, Science Education, Environmental Science and Fine Arts, Earth, Mineral and Natural Sciences, Agriculture and Agricultural Technology, Engineering and Engineering Technology, Health Sciences and Technology, Pure and Applied Sciences, including Biotechnology. The report also recommended the maintenance of admission through JAMB and the retention of entry qualifications as obtainable in the existing universities. However, given the specialized and demanding nature of courses in the universities and the importance government attached to quality, the report stipulated that candidates with ‘O’ Level certificates should spend five years instead of four while those with ‘A’ Level certificates should spend four.

Unfortunately, the report failed to address adequately the more critical issue of how to fund and improve science education at the secondary school level in order to ensure a steady supply of students for the proposed specialized universities. This problem had been largely responsible for low enrolment in science subjects since the 1960s. The seminar report merely noted that since there were many potential students who would be interested in these universities “if adequate facilities are made available, each university should aim at initial intake of about 250 students and thereafter increase as facilities permit.”²⁶ The huge cost of establishing seven new universities of technology aimed at admitting only 250 students seemed odd, especially

when the faculties of applied science and technology in the regular universities remained underfunded.

Given the underfunding of the existing universities since 1978 and the uncertainties of oil revenue, the quality of training expected at the proposed universities caused some considerable concern to stakeholders. The concern was that these universities would end up producing amateur scientists. Professor G.O. Olusanya, the director of studies at the National Institute of Strategic Studies, Kuru, articulated this when he praised the government for emphasizing science and technology but warned against establishing universities of technology for political popularity. According to him,

what we need today are men who can match theory competently with practice and a great deal of money would be expended to achieve this. It must be remembered that the constant and genuine complaints about the products of our Engineering and other professional faculties and schools is that most of their product are mere textbook engineers and professionals. Unless these problems are clearly articulated and properly resolved, all we shall be doing is engaging in wishful thinking.²⁷

Responding to increased doubt over its commitment to provide adequate funds for science education and educational expansion, the federal government reaffirmed its commitment in a budget speech delivered by Shagari at the joint session of the National Assembly on 24 November 1980. In that speech the president expressed the hope that the improved revenue from oil sales would help his government meet its obligations to the education sector. According to him, "The prospects for the economy in 1981 are good. The 1980 success will, I believe, constitute a launching pad for further achievement."²⁸ Based on the mistaken hopes of steady revenue from oil, and in order to meet its long-term objective of human resource development, the federal government launched the Fourth National Development Plan (Fourth NDP) in 1981. The plan, which covered the period between 1981 and 1985, had a program of ₦82 billion, the largest since planning began in 1960. It also projected student enrolment of over 103,000 in the federal universities by the 1984/85 session.²⁹ In addition, the plan

envisaged a capital expenditure of ₦2.2 billion on education, representing about 5.5 per cent of projected total federal government capital investment during the period. The planned expenditure for universities was ₦1.25 billion, representing 56.6 per cent of the total investment in the sector. This allocation disproportionately favoured universities, but the plan observed that unlike other levels of education, the development in the universities was constrained due to budgetary stringencies since the third plan period. It stressed that this situation “did not augur well for the growth of the universities especially in areas concerned with academic programmes and research. Moreover, the level of demand for university places has increased beyond proportions.”³⁰

The large financial allocation to university education under the Fourth NDP sought to consolidate and expand the existing university facilities.³¹ However, the plan had hardly taken off before the parameters on which the federal government based its revenue expectations changed dramatically following the collapse of the international oil market, beginning in 1981.³² Although the plan operated amidst a grave threat to the economy, the federal government still maintained its commitment to university education. Eager to keep campaign promises and retain his popularity, the Shagari government went ahead to establish three new universities of technology in Bauchi, Benue, and Imo states in October 1981 (and four others later) largely through external borrowing.

Quota System and the Challenges of Nationhood

In line with the federal principle enunciated in the 1979 constitution and eager to close the educational gap between the North and the South, Shagari reopened the contentious quota system in university admissions. In spite of introducing of free education, the enrolment of students from the educationally disadvantaged regions remained low. Admission statistics for 1980 revealed that, out of 17,729 students offered admission, only 4,068 were from the North. To achieve the objective of ensuring geographical balance among the various geopolitical components, the federal ministry of education issued guidelines on the implementation of a quota system for university admission to JAMB in September 1981.³³ The quota system,

like affirmative action in the United States of America, aimed at 'democratizing' access to university by easing admission competition for under-represented groups in Nigerian universities.

The new admission guidelines, which would be implemented by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (a central admission body created in 1978), stipulated four criteria for securing admissions. First, it reserved 40 per cent of yearly admissions for Academic Merit. Universities would determine this criterion by ranking candidates based on their scores in the University Matriculation Examinations (UME). In other words, 40 per cent of the entire applicants in a year who scored highest were selected for various courses. The second criteria, Educationally Disadvantaged States, reserved 20 per cent of yearly admission for candidates from states such as Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Gongola, Kaduna, Kano, Lagos, Niger, Plateau, Rivers, and Sokoto.³⁴ Twenty per cent of students from those states who scored a minimal average pass mark prescribed by the JAMB would secure admission.

The third criterion, called Catchment Area, reserved 30 per cent of admission for students from the immediate vicinity of an educational facility, which, in most cases, were the geographical or socio-cultural areas near to the institution. As with the second criterion, 30 per cent of students from a university's catchment areas with minimum pass marks received admission offers. This criterion was designed to help such students from surrounding states enjoy preferential treatment in admission.³⁵ The fourth criterion was Discretion, which reserved 10 per cent of admission to be based on the circumstances of the applicant. Benefiting students must meet JAMB's minimum pass mark, but individual universities admitted students under this category using different yardsticks without necessarily ranking the candidates. The new guidelines, however, did not change the basic qualifying requirements for university admissions, which included minimum passes in some prescribed 'O' Level subjects.

As an illustration, if the JAMB pass mark in a given year was 200 points, candidates who scored 200 or more were likely to secure admission. If 300 candidates whose scores ranged from 200 to 330 points sought 100 available places in history, only forty students with the highest points would be admitted under academic merit. Although students who scored below 280 passed the entry exam, they could still lose admission under

merit. However, such candidates could still secure admission if they met any other quota criteria. Since candidates from educationally disadvantaged states received 20 per cent of the allocation, history would fill the admission quota by ranking relevant candidates by their scores and selecting twenty students. Similarly, thirty students from the catchment area of the university would be selected after ranking them by their scores. Finally, the university administrators would select the remaining 10 per cent of the students without necessarily following a ranking format, bringing the total number of students to 100 – though all the selected students must score above 200 points. The quota system, which had been resisted for so many years, was finally incorporated into the admission requirements of Nigeria.

It was easy for Shagari to introduce the quota system because the federal government controlled all the universities in the country as well as the central admission body, JAMB. Shagari's approach was quite democratic although quite diplomatic as well. Wary that the south would reject it, other criteria such as Academic Merit, Educationally Disadvantaged States, Catchment Area, and Discretion were included to blunt the impact of a quota system. Northerners, who had detested JAMB since its establishment in 1978 because it offered admissions to students solely on academic merit, welcomed this change because it accommodated their interests. The government was both sensitive to the North's peculiar interest without discriminating against the South or well-qualified students. In reality, a well-qualified student had a better chance. If not admitted on Academic Merit, such students could still gain admission through Catchment Area and Discretion admission criteria since selection would be based on ranking. In comparison, a less qualified student had fewer chances.

In reality, however, it was possible that qualified students from the South, who applied to a university in North, could be denied admission. For instance, following the example above, if a student from the South scored 259 points, he would not secure admission under merit because the cut-off point was 280. In addition, since he was not from one of the educationally disadvantaged states as well as catchment areas, he would still be denied admission. Unless the student could influence the university authority to grant a discretionary admission, which was usually tricky, he might end up losing admission that year.³⁶ At the same time, a less qualified candidate with lower points (for example, 201) from one of

the educationally disadvantaged states could secure admission. A notable example was T. Fagbulu, a candidate from Edo state who, despite scoring high in the exam, was denied admission because he came from an educationally advantaged state. Fagbulu unsuccessfully protested through a legal action, thus highlighting citizens' engagement with government policies. As the *National Concord* newspaper wrote: "An ambitious 16-year old fearing for his future, has taken on [the government] ... over the quota system of admission into universities."³⁷ The counsel for the complainant begged the court "to declare as unconstitutional, null and void, the policy of admission as practiced by JAMB."³⁸ Similar cases existed but the federal government maintained its position.

Like the establishment of JAMB, the introduction of the quota system under Shagari, a northern, generated misgivings. Many southerners perceived it as a strategy to help the northerners while halting the educational advancement of the South. According to J.M. Kosemani, an educationist, the quota system was an "aggravated parody and a fraud on the nation, designed to kill initiative in some areas and encourage mediocrity in other areas."³⁹ Similarly, T. Megaforce, a political commentator, suspected that the new admission policy was a deliberate attempt to stem the tide of educational advancement in the South so that the North could catch up.⁴⁰ More striking was the criticism from Michael Angulu, the first registrar of JAMB, who stated that the quota system was anchored on cheating, the cheating of states in the south. In an interview with *Newswatch*, he pointed out that he came from one of the most educationally backward states in Nigeria [Benue], but he, together with three other candidates from the same region, had gained admission into University of Ibadan in 1957. He revealed that the number of candidates of northern origin who demanded higher education before and after independence had remained comparatively low, which partly inspired the introduction of a quota system in 1981.⁴¹ Nevertheless, he stressed that it would have been much better if the federal government went out of its way to strengthen the lower levels of education in the North over a period.

[For] that would be cheating the rest of the country but in the end; I think it is a fairer cheating than the quota system. I think it will be better for the federal government to spend extra money

over and above the allocation to states to strengthen education in those places so that after a period, they will be in a position to compete with everybody else. Now, this is likely to cause less resentment than what is now generally called the quota system.⁴²

The idea of a Nigeria divided into the educationally advantaged and disadvantaged states constituted the main source of controversy in the new admission policy. The federal government seemed to ignore the factors that disadvantaged the northerners in the first place. One of the main foundations rested with the political will of state governors in the South to commit large resources to education. The trend began during the colonial period when southern politicians embarked on universal education schemes while their northern counterparts dragged their feet. Compared to their northern counterparts, the southern governors allocated huge amounts to fund all levels of education.⁴³ Given this pattern of expenditure, increased numbers of southerners were in primary and secondary schools and later sought university admissions in greater numbers.

The federal government's desire to use the quota system to forge national unity seemed counterproductive. It did not enjoy the support of all Nigerians, mostly southern states. They believed that students of northern origin were given unfair advantage by exclusively granting them automatic admission since they came from educationally disadvantaged states – a privilege their counterparts from the South did not enjoy. Thus, the application of education policy aimed at uniting Nigerians had a negative impact on the notion of unity and patriotism. According to T.M. Yesefu, a former vice-chancellor of the University of Benin, a Nigerian who was deprived of an educational opportunity after meeting the qualifications for entrance because he came from the so-called educationally advantaged state, “has had the tenets and principles of a united Nigeria, demonstrably transformed into a mockery, if not totally and irrevocably destroyed within him.”⁴⁴ As he further noted, “no amount of singing the national Anthem, nor voluble recitation of the Pledge, would ever again make him a complete Nigerian. Henceforth, he is native of his state first, and being a Nigerian becomes secondary.”⁴⁵ To the beneficiary of the quota system, the effects, though unintended, would be the same. According to Yesefu, “the practice would have the same resultant effect on the student who, because he came

from the disadvantaged state benefited from the admission exercise.”⁴⁶ Having enjoyed special benefits because of state of origin, “his first loyalty would be to the state which apparently gave him the rare opportunity, not the Federal Government.”⁴⁷ Given this scenario, the goal of national unity, which the policy aimed to achieve, seemed undermined. It was not surprising, therefore, that states, especially those in the South began a push to own their own universities.

State Participation in Higher Education

For bright students from the South to increase their chances of securing admissions, they were better off applying to neighbouring universities where they were at least certain to secure admission either on merit or catchment area criteria. Many states and students in the South felt alienated. Reactions were immediate. The affected states moved swiftly toward founding their own universities. Indeed, one of the consequences of federalization of university education since 1975 and of placing higher education on the concurrent legislative list in 1979 was the agitation by the nineteen states to own universities. One of the major projects prominent on the minds of every state governor when they came to power in 1979 was to establish a university. This action always enhanced the reputation of the governor as an effective leader. Under the 1979 constitutional arrangement, both the state and federal government were granted the power to legislate on the establishment of institutions of higher learning. With prompt exercise of this power, Anambra and Bendel states had established state universities Anambra State University of Science and Technology and Bendel State University, Ekpoma respectively in 1980.

Perhaps determined to overcome the limited opportunities for state residents evident in the quota system and eager to fulfill campaign promises of free education for all, other southern states pressed ahead with their university dreams, often with limited resources. In Imo State, which had recorded the highest number of university applicants, the gap between demand and supply was wide. In response to his electoral promise, the Imo State Governor, Sam Mbakwe, made a strong case for the establishment of a university to provide opportunities for qualified residents, hitherto

denied opportunities in the federal universities. According to him, out of the 113,162 candidates who took the entrance exam in the 1978/79 session, “Imo State had 19,702 candidates, but only 2,126 or about 10% of them was offered admission. Therefore, we need our own University.”⁴⁸ In addition, during the 1979/80 session, the number of applicants from Imo State increased to 20,485, but again, only 2,334 candidates successfully secured admission.⁴⁹ Before Mbakwe, other prominent Imo residents had made a similar case. For instance, earlier in 1978, Jaja Wachukwu, a former minister of foreign affairs, speaking at a press conference, noted that the federal government’s decision to centralize the establishment of universities had stifled Imo State. He stated that Imo State had the greatest number of post-primary school products yearning for university education yearly. As he stressed, “no state has a better case for a new university than Imo State because it produces more students ripe for university education than any of the newly created states.”⁵⁰

Criticism from states without universities had continued to grow since the early years of Shagari administration. The senate debated the rising demand for state universities, even contemplating to transfer the control of all the universities to the state governments. Professor Akintoye proposed that the federal government should grant money to the seven states – Ondo, Niger, Gongola, Ogun, Imo, Bauchi, and Benue.⁵¹ “A university was needed,” Abubakar Barde, governor of Gongola State, told the local College of Preliminary Studies in Yola “due to the hardship [indigenes] encountered in seeking admission to the country’s universities.”⁵² Such sentiments were common in Nigeria during the early 1980s.

In view of the limitation imposed on the students from the educationally advantaged states in the federal universities and the desire for state governors to fulfill electoral promises in order to remain relevant politically and to exercise their constitutional power, which permitted states to establish their universities, the following state universities emerged in 1981: Imo State University, Etiti (now Abia State University, Uturu), and Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt. Two more following state universities, Ondo State University, Ado Ekiti, and Ogun State University, Ago-Iwoye, emerged in 1982, followed in 1983 with the establishment of Lagos State University and Cross River University. By 1983, there were twenty-eight universities in the country.

The movement to establish universities at the state and federal levels, according to Adamolekun, “appears to be inexorably in the direction of university education for the masses.”⁵³ However, these universities emerged in an atmosphere of severe economic constraints, which shows that politics dominated educational considerations. In their desire to score political advantages, governors of these states committed more of their increasingly scarce resources to university education. Given the fact that revenue from oil began to decline in 1981, state universities became financial burdens to the states’ meagre resources.

Economic Meltdown of 1983

The proliferation of federal and state universities was bound to weigh heavily on government finances. As early as 1981, the federal government, worried about the heavy cost of supporting free education in the face of dwindling national income, set up the Onabamiro Commission on Alternative Sources of Funding.⁵⁴ Focusing on higher education, the commission recommended the sharing of education funding among the three branches of the government – local, state, and federal – with education taxes to be levied on all. It urged the government to abandon its free education policy and to re-introduce fees at all education levels. The recommendation was echoed in the report of the Presidential Commission on Salary and Conditions of Service of University Staff (otherwise called the Cookey Commission), which condemned the proliferation of universities in Nigeria and advised the government to build fewer centres of excellence.

The recommendation of the Onabamiro Commission seemed economically sound, but, given the country’s mood, it was politically unrealistic. Implementing it would have been political suicide for the Shagari regime largely because Nigerians had been made to believe that access to education could be free. As Jubril Aminu noted: “It is doubtful if any civilian government would wish to entertain the commotion that would follow any attempt to reintroduce tuition fees or to increase charges in our educational institutions.”⁵⁵ In fact, many Nigerians rejected the proposals of the Onabamiro and Cookey’s commissions, believing that it “tilted the balance somewhat in favor of university education for an elite.”⁵⁶ Despite the efforts

Table 5.1: Students' Applications and Admissions.

| Period | Applied | Admitted | Percentage |
|---------|----------|----------|------------|
| 1980/81 | 145,837 | 20, 429 | 14 |
| 1981/82 | 180, 685 | 22, 460 | 12.4 |
| 1982/83 | 191, 583 | 19, 897 | 10.07 |

Source: *The Guardian*, 8 September 1984, 8.

of both states and federal government to expand access to university, university education remained essentially elitist. Although student population rose to 116,822 in 1983, demand continued to outstrip supply, as shown in Table 5.1.⁵⁷

Although the government intended the quota system to facilitate and equalize access to universities, the South still dominated educational opportunities between 1979 and 1983. In the 1979/80 session, the number of applicants from the former Northern Region was 15,449 and 23.1 per cent were offered admission. During the same period, 97,989 students from the South applied for admission and 75.7 per cent gained admission. The statistics remained the same during the 1982/83 session when out of 26,747 northern students who applied for admission, 22.7 per cent received admission offers; 177,618 students in the south applied and 76 per cent gained admission.⁵⁸

In the area of science and technology, universities did not make significant progress. For instance, between 1975 and 1979, the combined average output of agriculturalists and technologists in all the Nigerian universities accounted for only 14 per cent of the yearly total of graduates. During this period, the percentage of students in the faculties of Agriculture, Engineering, Architecture, Medical and Natural Sciences were few compared to those in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Law, and Education. 55 per cent of students were in Nigerian universities in 1980 to study in the Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, a trend that continued up to 1983.⁵⁹ As a result, up to 1983, Nigerian universities trained a yearly average of only thirty scientists and engineers. This number did not

meet the government target of training sufficient personnel to execute the technologically oriented programs it had embarked upon.

In spite of the federal government's desire to train more scientists and engineers, the demand for science courses was low because science education at the secondary-school level was not given a high priority. Thus, most universities relied on remedial programs to train candidates to fill up the admission quota in the sciences. This practice, however, did not address the root of the problem. As Professor M.J.C. Echeruo, the first Vice-Chancellor of Imo State University remarked,

if I was given a million naira today to admit one hundred remedial students into Imo State University, I would immediately donate the money to ten good secondary schools in this state and I can assure you that they will produce more than enough sound and qualified university applicants for this country at a fraction of what it would cost the university.⁶⁰

The logic of Echeruo's position as he noted was: "Good education is best established early in life. It costs less to do so anyway."⁶¹ Similarly, displeased with the low enrolment and output of science-oriented students in the University of Lagos, the vice-chancellor, Professor Akin Adesola, stated in his 1983 convocation address that Nigeria "cannot build [its] technological pyramid from the top without due regard to the nature, structure and strength of the base – the Primary and Secondary Education systems."⁶² It is surprising that a government that committed itself to science and technology by building federal universities of technology and allocating huge amounts to university education under the Fourth NDP, failed to pay equal attention to science education at the secondary school levels.

Any hopes of addressing the problems in the education sector dimmed with the economic recession that became severe in 1983. The over-reliance of government on oil revenue and the instability of the international market took a toll on government social programs, including university education. The price of oil, which was at its peak in 1980, slumped in 1982.⁶³ Consequently, the federal government revenue declined considerably. The level of oil production averaged 1.75 million barrels per day by 1981 while an average of 2.3 million barrels per day was used in the projections for the

Fourth National Development Plan. The combined effect of falling prices and production levels was to drop export earnings from oil from ₦4.199.7 million in 1980 to ₦10.529.5 million in 1981.⁶⁴ The resultant economic crisis of the 1980s worsened and dramatically affected the external sector. For example, between 1981 and 1983, the average monthly import bill was US\$2.0 billion while exports averaged US\$1.5 billion. Nigeria's foreign debt increased from ₦3.3 billion in 1978 to ₦14.7 billion in 1983. By 1983, the nineteen state governments had run up a combined debt of ₦13.3 billion. The ratio of debt service to exports climbed from 9.0 per cent in 1981 to 18.5 per cent in 1982 and 23.6 per cent in 1983. Arrears on letters of credit accumulated, and in 1983, some US\$2.1 billion of such debts had to be refinanced over a thirty-month period.⁶⁵ The existing universities suffered from underfunding arising from the economic meltdown. National newspapers in Nigeria confirmed the financial strain of Nigerian universities when it reported increases in hostel fees and cancellation of bursary awards, among other things.⁶⁶

The seriousness of the economic crisis became unmistakable when the Committee of Vice-Chancellors convened a seminar to discuss the apt and relevant subject of "Nigeria: The Universities, the Nation, and the Economic Recession." In his keynote address, the vice president, Alex Ekwueme, compared the recession of the 1980s with world economic slumps of the early 1930s. He argued that the recession was not peculiar to Nigeria; it was a worldwide phenomenon, affecting mostly African countries.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Ekwueme argued that the Nigerian governments during the era of oil boom in the 1970s were unmindful of the trap set by the industrialized countries, which lured them into indiscriminate and heavy borrowing which brought the country's external debt to \$15 billion in 1983.⁶⁸

Ekwueme, however, neglected to mention that just as the military government in the 1970s undertook ambitious projects based on unrealistic revenue expectation, the civilian government in the early 1980s suffered from a similar mentality. The 1983 economic recession revealed the peculiar extravagance that characterized civilian administrations at both federal and state government levels. The Fourth NDP stated as its policy objective "the building of new [universities]," but it was apparent even to a layman that it would be cheaper and more cost-effective in the long run to expand

facilities in the existing universities to cope with increased demand than to build new ones. Instead of taking that route to expanding access, the civilian regime established seven new federal universities and eight state universities and upgraded five advanced colleges of education to university degree-awarding institutions.⁶⁹

Why would the federal and state governments found fifteen new universities within a short period of four years when the existing ones were inadequately funded? The probable answer was politics, for education easily became vulnerable to mass politics and pressure. "Politics," as Dan Agabese noted, "remains a strong determinant in the development of Nigeria's social institutions – health, education, transportation."⁷⁰ Since the 1979 Constitution empowered states to own universities, governors "saw universities as amenities and so opted for mushrooming them."⁷¹ The politicians had failed to read the economic signs of the time. Instead of operating the political system with the economic discretion of statesmanship, "they thrived in personal aggrandizement."⁷² Official corruption and mismanagement of resources may account partly for the low funding of universities as well as the economic downturn. Corruption was a dominant issue in the execution of social and economic policies of the civilian regime, laying the foundation for future economic difficulties. As Ray Ekpu noted, since "the leadership was patently unpatriotic, mentally and morally bankrupt, the system was used and misused in building a concrete grave for the burial of Nigeria."⁷³ Politicians were more interested in the kickbacks they would receive from contracts awards than the actual execution of projects, including university projects.⁷⁴

Instead of expanding facilities in the existing universities to accommodate more students, they expended resources to build new universities, each with its own jumbo bureaucracy without significant increase in school population. As Achike Okafo argued: "if we are inclined to proliferate the country with universities, we must be prepared to provide what it takes to make them proper universities. That is the inescapable truth."⁷⁵ There was no evidence of a long-term plan for the future sustainability of the government's massification policies. In a paper presented at the National Conference on Education Since Independence, N.A. Nwagwu, a professor at the University of Benin, noted that what passed as policy-making

in education in Nigeria was “often a mere attempt to rationalize political decisions and actions hastily and expediently conceived and executed.”⁷⁶

The federal government pursued politically attractive projects such as establishing a federal university in every state, commissioning iron and steel plants, and indiscriminately awarding contracts to build the new federal capital at Abuja. Faced with the fall in oil revenue, the federal and state governments secured foreign loans to carry out their ambitious social spending, anticipating an oil-price recovery that never came. The collapse of crude oil prices in the world market and the government’s inclination to external borrowing in order to prosecute its programs demonstrated that politicians of the Second Republic failed to learn useful lessons from the educational policies and programs of their military predecessors. They could hardly claim that “Nigeria’s economic recession, obvious to vigilant observers since 1976, would not materially affect their calculations and over-generous promises in the manifestoes for the 1979 elections.”⁷⁷ By first abolishing fees and then fixing boarding and lodging charges in most of the educational institutions, governments lost enormous sources of revenue for education. More importantly, they lost the participatory spirit of Nigerians in education. In 1978, the attempt to increase boarding charges from 15 kobo to 50 kobo per meal cost Nigerians countless lives from student riots. Similarly, in 1981, effort to remove rice from the menu of one university claimed the lives of two students. Thus, the federal government avoided potential social upheavals, as Jubril Aminu had noted.⁷⁸

The civilian governments failed to realize that there were limits to expansion and that it was impossible to expand indefinitely without a sustainable means of funding. They ignored the wide gap between policy and implementation, between wishes and realities. The free education policy under the military in the 1970s led to unrealistic expectations from Nigerians who hoped to obtain education without making sacrifices. This mindset was heightened under the civilian government of Shagari when the pursuit of massification was accelerated without adequate long-term strategic planning. Nigerians, for political reasons, were “encouraged to believe that Government can do anything and everything for them.... Therefore, everyone wants education and, of course, see no reason why they have to pay for it.”⁷⁹ With the large number of secondary school graduates, salary structure and qualifications for work, which placed emphasis on

university education as the gateway to the upper social and economic strata, the increased provision of public and private grants, and government doctrine of free education and the need for trained workforce, the demand for university education remained phenomenal during the Second Republic. Unfortunately, in 1983 Nigeria was “caught in the web of recession just when [it was] ... still at the threshold of mass university education.”⁸⁰

Given the reality of Nigeria’s ailing economy in 1983, the question was whether Nigeria would meet its financial obligation to satisfy demands for “free mass university education.”⁸¹ Shagari, who was inaugurated on 1 October 1983, for a second term in office, thought otherwise. He declared that Nigeria’s “economy can simply not survive if we insist on living the styles we had been living in 1981 and part of 1982” and he cautioned that the government “cannot go on with a spending spree which is beyond the absorptive capacity of the economy.”⁸² The gloomy picture of the economy became apparent when the president acknowledged in his 1984 budget speech, delivered on 29 December 1983, that the country is going through an economic recession. Among the measures to revive the economy, as the president enumerated, were “reduction of public expenditures, diversification of revenues sources, privatization of government parastatals and companies, generation of more revenue through imposition of new or higher fees for public services, securing a World Bank structural adjustment loan as well as an IMF balance of payment loan, and payment of re-scheduled short-term debts.”⁸³

Conclusion

What makes the history of university education between 1979 and 1983 significant is the manner in which the federal and state governments seized the opportunity provided by the 1979 Constitution to expand the university system. The federal government was committed to accelerated decolonization of the British elitist system of higher education when it provided free university education to all Nigerians and unsuccessfully attempted to open a National Open University. It also engaged university education in the service of rapid economic development when it established seven universities of technology. In addition, when it introduced the quota system

of admission in 1981 and located the new universities to satisfy regional interests, the federal government expressly identified itself with the notion that equal opportunities for university access was vital in promoting greater national unity and closing the educational gap between the South and the North. However, since state governments, particularly those in the South, felt that the quota system deprived many of their indigenes access to federal universities, they established eight universities. Yet, the demand for university places continued to outrun its supply. Economic depression, occasioned by the decline in oil revenues and aggravated by official corruption and mismanagement of public funds, set in in 1983. In response, the federal government decided to suspend its massive spending on social services, including university education. Before Shagari could carry out his vision, he was overthrown in a military coup on 31 December 1983. The struggling economy that the new military government inherited dictated their attitudes to social spending, including in university expansion, during fourth attempt at massification, 1984–90.

