
Ogechi Emmanuel Anyanwu’s book, The Politics of Access: University Education and Nation-Building in Nigeria, is made up of a list of abbreviations as well as introduction, seven (7) chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and an index. The author underscores, among other details, that “this book argues that the premise of building a modern Nigerian nation underscored the pursuit of mass university education policies by Nigeria’s successive post-colonial governments. It shows the centrality of a vision of university education to the ‘nationalist project’ in Nigeria and demonstrates that the move to mass university education was an essential social imaginary for Nigeria’s vision of itself as a modern dynamic nation-state,” (pp. 1-2).

The seven chapters, coupled with specific theses, promote Anyanwu’s fascinating analysis in the 298-page volume. In order to give expression and substance to his views in the book, which reads like a political history of the development of higher education in the oil-rich country (Nigeria), the author introduces the reader to the peculiar nature of Western education that was introduced in the country as long ago as 1842 (p. 19); that form of education created contradictions between the traditional education system transmitted informally through oral tradition and the Islamic educational genus (p. 18). For example, the British introduced English language as the lingua franca for the then colonial territory and for the governance of the society (p. 22), which was amalgamated in 1914 (from the northern and southern protectorates). But as the British suzerainty over Nigeria, as a colony started to wane following the end of WWII (1939-1945), attempts to grant independence to Nigerian nationalists became an important agenda in both London and Lagos. However, self-rule could be meaningless if the country did not produce the necessary human capital to govern the polity following emancipation. The desire, therefore, was to construct tertiary institutions to train indigenous citizens to whom the British overseers would hand over the baton of administrative leadership. The question that arose was that of the character of the established university or universities to be charged with undertaking the onerous mission of training future Nigerian administrators.

Although nationalists were in favor of producing sufficient educated cadres that would step into the shoes of the departing bureaucrats and set the country on an adequate path to nationhood and nation-building, the British colonialist leaders thought otherwise. Indeed, the position of the British administrators was that of creating a major university whose standard and quality of education would be tantamount to top universities anywhere in the world. It was to this end that University College of Ibadan (UCI) was established in 1948 after
much debate (p. 33). Because of the anomaly of British education policy toward the Northern (mostly Muslim population) and Southern (mostly Christians) regions, the admission of southern students to UCI was 97 per cent to just 3 per cent for the northern states between 1948 and 1952 (p. 35). The unevenness in intake of students to this prestigious university was later to create political instability in the Nigerian federation. If political upheaval issuing from the disparity in educational opportunities in the society was to be ameliorated in order to advance national cohesion, there was need for reformation of the education system; it was necessary for such a transformation to take into consideration the educational discrepancy and complexion of the north and south.

Confronted with the need to address the shortage of indigenous manpower in post-colonial Nigeria, the urgency and policy to increase en masse the number of university graduates became a sine qua non. The elitist nature of the colonial British educational scheme as represented by UCI would be inadequate for this “giant of Africa.” Moreover, the post-war reality, within the British Empire, in which London was broke after the impressive victory over Germany and its allies, meant that its financial support for her colonies would be curtailed. It was at this juncture that the United States through the Carnegie Corporation stepped in to collaborate with Britain and Nigeria in the process of augmentation of the nation’s educational system (pp. 1, 14, 37). The diplomatic discourses and outcome of the deliberations to expand the number of universities so as to provide more access to Nigeria’s future leaders reflected the interests of the parties involved in the negotiations (pp. 63-67).

All the same, there was a consensus that a strategy for increasing the number of graduates necessary to meet the manpower demands of the country would rest on the regionalization of new universities (to compete with the elitist UCI). Whereas the motive for this project was sound on paper, it was clear that the quality of education in the society was sacrificed on the altar of politics – particularly military politics. This was so, in part, because of inadequate financial support for the old and new institutions and insufficient supply of qualified students (particularly from the north with Higher School Certificate-HSC or advanced level General Certificate of Education-GCE, which was required for direct admission).

If the question of fairness within the admission system was to be pursued it became imperative in the period from 1970 to 1979 to institute a scheme that would centralize the administration of the universities and provide a universal mechanism for its governance; this objective was expressed in the establishment of a Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). This board would oversee the admission of students into federally supported universities. If the spirit of national cohesion was to be furthered in this multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, it was similarly necessary to administer an affirmative action program of sorts to address the inadequacy of students from areas that had not been exposed to sufficient Western education. This admission reform was referred to as the quota system (p. 115).

Paradoxically, while an Open University system was considered useful for the overall development purpose of Nigeria, the program was confronted with many difficulties; indeed, the proliferation of universities with meager support and the quota system are two cases in point. In short, if universities are built they would need students to fill them up – and the process of doing so was especially problematic given the deficient pool of eligible students and financial burden of running a first class university.

The financial woes that the country was confronted with in the 1980s and beyond were of behemoth proportion. The structural adjustment program (SAP) and its conditionalities for