

Quota System, Federal Character Principle and Admission to Federal Unity Schools: Barriers to Learning in Nigeria

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Abstract

While the quota system came into being prior to Nigeria's independence in 1960, the federal character principle became officially recognised in the 1979 constitution. These policies were aimed at addressing the issues of ethnic representation in the public sector. The implication of these was that issues of admission, recruitment, promotion and appointment became based on these principles. In other words, advancement in the country's public institutions, which ought to be the drivers of development, is neither based on merit nor competence. Where these principles have played out visibly is in the admission system into Federal Unity Schools. With the adoption and analysis of secondary data, the paper observes that the inclusion of the quota system and federal character principle in the educational sector creates a scenario of discrimination against Nigerians in their own country by virtue of their ethnic identification, which is contrary to the provisions of the constitution. This paper therefore recommends, among others that Nigeria needs a review of her educational policies and an extensive educational infrastructural development to accommodate its growing student population. It concludes that the quota system and federal character principle have been the major barriers to learning in Nigeria.

Keywords: quota system, federal character principle, federal unity schools, education, Nigeria

Introduction

The heterogeneous configuration of the Nigerian state has since inception generated series of issues that have continued to engage the government in thinking ways of preserving the existence of the system. These issues have divided the country along ethnic, religious, majority-minority, advantaged-disadvantaged lines. Unfortunately, education has had its fair share in the struggles resulting in an educationally imbalanced society, where the south is educationally advantaged and the north is disadvantaged. In the light of this, the introduction of quota system and federal character principle in education became pivotal in extinguishing the already looming class conflict, as they were aimed at fostering national integration, sense of belonging and a wholesome development of the entire parts of the state.

Despite the immediate successes recorded by these policies in widening the opportunity of quality education to the educationally disadvantaged states, merit and competence is being sacrificed on the altar of the twin policies.

However, this paper seeks to interrogate the adoption of quota system and federal character principle to the system of education in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the admission process to the Federal Unity Schools. It also seeks to examine the extent to which the policies have become barriers to learning in the country. Therefore, qualitative method was adopted to collect data from texts, academic journals, conference proceedings and other relevant materials, while descriptive approach was employed for analysis.

Conceptual Clarifications:

The Federal Character Principle

There appears to be a general agreement amongst scholars in respect to the origins of the Federal Character Principle. Scholars are of the opinion that the principle was the creation of the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) that was set up by the General Murtala Mohamed/Olusegun Obasanjo's military government in 1975. However, they also share the view that the federal character officially became a constitutional matter after its inclusion in the 1979 Constitution which stated that:

The composition of the Federal Government or any of its agencies and the conduct of their affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to recognize the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and to command national loyalty. Accordingly, the predominance in that government or its agencies of persons from a few ethnic or other sectional groups shall be avoided.^{1, 2, 3, 4}

While there is unanimity with regards to the origin of the Federal Character Principle, a consensus however on the definition of the concept itself remains elusive.

The Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) conceptualized federal character as:

The distinctive desire of the peoples of Nigeria to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every citizen of Nigeria a sense of belonging to the nation notwithstanding the diversities of ethnic origin, culture, language or religion which may exist and which it is their desire to nourish, harness to the environment of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.^{5, 4}

Some scholars, however, seem not to agree with this definition. For instance, Gberevbie & Ibietan criticised the definition of federal character by the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) as being "very inadequate and suffers on many counts".⁴ They further asserted that "the desire to nourish" in the definition appears very ambiguous. In the same vein, Afigbo stated that the federal character cannot be a desire. He however went ahead to assert that "federal character of Nigeria must be taken to mean the character of the Nigerian federation".¹ Okpata defines the Federal character principle in Nigeria as the democratization of the public bureaucracy through the principle of representation as contained in the 1979 constitution of Nigeria.⁶

However a different approach in the perception of the principle was adopted by Obiyan & Akindele. They opined that the federal character principle "essentially refers to the recognition of the plural nature of the country in recruitment, distribution of administrative and political offices and power as well as the resources of the country". For them, the federal character principle was structured so as to address the challenges of imbalance and discrimination. In other words, the Federal Character Principle is "the attempt to eschew group imbalance in public institutions and affairs".⁷ In this regard, Akpanabia sees the Federal character principle as "a practice where every nationality is represented in all government owned institutions". He further explains it as "designed to ensure equity, fair-play and order among different ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria in the distribution of resources, so as to promote national harmony and loyalty for economic development in the polity".⁸ Also in this respect, Ekeh posits that the federal character principle sought to give "opportunities in education and employment, usually at the point of entry, to disadvantaged groups and areas to enable them compete and catch up with more advanced areas and sectors of the nation".⁹

For Ojo, the Federal character principle is "an integrative mechanism"; he defines it as "fair and effective representation of the various components of the Federation in the country's position of power, status and influence".¹⁰ The introduction of federal character policies in Nigerian state is to foster unity, peace, equal access to state resources and promote the integration of the less advantage states for better improvement and good conditions of living in the country.¹¹ Bello shares this integrative view and stipulated that the federal character principle was a constitutionally guaranteed recipe for national integration.² To buttress this point, Obiyan & Akindele affirmed that the principle is:

Premised on the ground that when national institutions and affairs are reflective, in composition and conduct, of the pluralism of the country then, a sense of belonging is likely to be evoked from the citizenry. It is also designed to mitigate, if not obviate, the bellicose political struggle that characterised previous Nigeria's democratic systems.⁷

The Quota System

According to Chafe, the primary requirement for debating a thing is to first understand the actual thing being talked about. More often than not, the quota system has been confused to be the same as the federal character principle.^{12, 13} This is an error that is easily committed due to the fact that both policies were responses to the challenges arising from a multi-ethnic and multicultural entity like Nigeria. Quota system was purposed at facilitating equal representation of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria's public service.^{14, 15} But confusion has been made by a number of scholars who stated that the federal character principle "was known by different nomenclatures such as zoning or quota system".^{16, 3} Others submit that the quota system is the "corollary" of the federal character.⁶ Nevertheless, certain scholars have attempted to distinguish the two concepts.^{9, 4} Ekeh argues that the federal character principle "demands far more" than the quota system in the sense that "it switches emphasis from opportunities to privileges and benefits". In other words, for him, while the quota system "creates opportunities for disadvantaged states", the federal character principle in addition creates "soft landing for them".⁹ In the same vein, "special consideration should be given to candidates from the Northern provinces and other areas where educational facilities were more backward than elsewhere".¹⁷ To this extent, though the quota system and federal character seem alike; the latter however covers wider scope than the former.¹³

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this paper, the Integration theory is adopted as an explanatory tool. The concepts of quota system and federal character are best understood within the framework of the integration theory. This is because of the assumptions of the theory. The presumption here is that there exists a multicultural and multi-ethnic society in which the various groups are defined by their respective languages, or other self-conscious cultural qualities and that their interaction is characterised by the tensions and discontinuities on the horizontal plane. Within this context, integration is used to refer to the process of creating a homogeneous progressive reduction of cultural and regional territorial political community.¹⁸ It is a process of inter-locking linkages where every hitherto dividing boundaries are deliberately dismantled to allow for a more frequent contact, cooperation, consensus and community.^{19, 10}

Integration therefore must be situated in this discourse as a careful and thorough understanding of the fundamentals of the past, conceiving practical steps of what happens after, a disposition to be cohesive, subjected to a mutually agreed programme.^{20, 10} Also, Leonard Binder describes integration as involving a high degree of comprehensiveness.²¹

This theory therefore bring the understanding of different attempts by the Nigerian government to create an harmonious and cohesive society, culminating in the formulation of quota system and federal character principle with the intention of conjuring nationwide development. This is to address the issue of developmental imbalance, fear of dominance and suspicion between and among various ethnic groups.

Quota System and Federal Character Principle in Nigeria's Educational System: A Historical Overview

The structure and configuration of the Nigerian colonial state brought about imbalance in the representation of the numerous ethnic groups in federal institutions, as colonialism favoured particular groups over the others. This gave rise

to the agitation for a system that will encourage equity and justice among the various entities. By 1958 a quota system was introduced to quell this agitation for access into public service.^{4, 22} A quota of 50% was allotted to the North, while 25% each to the East and West.²² But despite the huge educational gap between the north and the south in the 1950s this system of quota was not employed, as the International University Council (IUC) insisted on merit as pivotal for academic excellence and admissions to the University College, Ibadan. This stance of merit over quota was maintained by the post-colonial government of Alhaji Tafawa Balewa.^{15, 22}

This policy continuity further widened the educational gap between the north and south, reflecting in serious socio-economic disparity. By the 1970s, Northern leaders became more concerned with the extent to which the north has been left behind in the area of western education, thereby intensifying the clamour for an inclusion of the quota system in education.¹⁵ This issue of quota system aggravated fear and distrust in the country, while the south resisted the idea with an argument that it negates international educational standards, the north insisted that the non-inclusion of this system creates a barrier to the western educationally weak northerners to be educated and become as competitive as the southerners.^{23, 15}

Concerned about the already building up tension within the ethnic groups, as a result of the quota system subject with the fact that the country recently ended a civil war in 1970, the Military Government of General Yakubu Gowon, in 1972 attempted the dismantling of academic barriers to Northern Nigeria. Though he was not in support of the idea of a quota system, Gowon suggested that without playing down on merit, the primary and secondary school education in the disadvantaged states—which are mostly situated in Northern Nigeria—should be strengthened by adopting a massive education programme that provided increased educational facilities across the North to equate that of the South.¹⁵ Unfortunately, his government was overthrown by another military coup. On 6 September 1976, the General Olusegun Obasanjo led government launched the Universal Free Primary Education to provide free and compulsory primary education for all Nigerian child.²⁴

In spite of government's efforts, the North expressed their dissatisfaction through a violent protest which crippled the education sector and eventually forced the introduction of the quota system in education.²⁵ See Table 1.

Table 1: Admission formula into federal tertiary institutions introduced by the Gen. Murtala/Obasanjo Military Administration.

Criteria	Admission formula
Merit	40%
States Quota	30%
Catchment zone	20%
Discretion	10%

Source: ^{25, 26, 27}

To build upon the achievements of the quota system, Obasanjo further introduced a Federal Character Principle to the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which was designed to give opportunities to disadvantaged groups in education and employment, usually at the point of entry, so as to enhance their ability to compete with the advantaged groups.^{3, 4}

Quota System, Federal Character Principle and Admission to Federal Unity Schools in Nigeria

Having seen the history of quota system and federal character principle, it becomes necessary to analyse its applications in the admission process into the unity schools. As stated before, the idea of quota system came to the fore because of the multi-ethnic nature of the polity and imbalance in educational development of the various geo-political zones. Presently, Nigeria is made up of 36 states and admission into the unity schools in the country is not based on merit

alone but also on the principle of federal character and quota system with the aim of bringing about equalization of opportunity of the various states in education. While the states in the north are said to be backward and educationally disadvantaged, and thus, candidates in these states are given admission into the unity schools with low scores, candidates from states in the south are said to be in a vantage position as far as education is concerned and their cut-off marks for admission into the unity schools are always very high. See Table 2 for the cut-off marks based on state/locality in the 2013 National Common Entrance Examinations (NCEE).

Table 2: 2013 National Common Entrance Examinations Cut-off marks by state.

Region	Geo-Political Zone	States	NCEE Cut off marks	
			Male	Female
Northern Region	North Central	Benue	111	111
		Kogi	119	119
		Kwara	123	123
		Nasawara	75	75
		Niger	93	93
		Plateau	90	90
	North East	Adamawa	62	62
		Bauchi	35	35
		Gombe	58	58
		Borno	45	45
		Taraba	3	11
		Yobe	2	27
	North West	Sokoto	9	13
		Zamfara	4	2
		Kebbi	9	20
Kaduna		91	91	
Jigawa		44	44	
Southern Region	South East	Katsina	60	60
		Anambra	139	139
		Enugu	134	134
		Ebonyi	112	112
		Imo	138	138
	South West	Abia	130	130
		Lagos	133	133
		Ogun	131	131
		Oyo	127	127
		Osun	127	127
		Ondo	126	126
	South South	Ekiti	119	119
		Edo	127	127
		Delta	131	131
		Rivers	118	118
Bayelsa		72	72	
Cross River		97	97	
Akwa-Ibom	123	123		

Source: ²⁸

From the above table, it can be inferred that, a pupil from Anambra State is expected to score at least 139 to gain admission into the unity schools, while his counterpart from Yobe and Zamfara States is required to score only two

marks out of a possible 200. This denotes that while candidate with 138 points in Anambra may not be given admission, candidate from Zamfara with just two points will be offered admission. It can also be observed that there is discrimination between male and female candidates in some states. For example, while male candidates from Yobe, Taraba and Kebbi States are required to score two, three and nine marks out of a possible 200, respectively, female counterparts are expected to score 27, 11 and 20 marks out of a possible 200 respectively to qualify for admission into the unity schools. A candidate of Lagos State origin is expected to score 133 before he or she could qualify for admission, while those from Bornu State only need to score forty-five to be admitted. Candidate from Osun are expected to score 127 to be admitted into a unity school.²⁹ It was observed that in the 2012 examination into the unity schools, out of the 6000 candidates that made the cut off mark, Anambra State had the lion share. If all the candidates that merited admission should be given admission it was argued that, there will be no unity colleges.²⁸

In the main, admission into unity schools is done through national merit, state of origin merit, catchment area and educationally disadvantaged states modes. Suffice to say that after quota is drawn, each state is expected to fill its quota. It is however, observed that a state may be given 250 slots for instance, in order to fill the slots, it is necessary to draw a merit list from which candidates will be selected based on performance of its indigenes before other modes are considered. However, there are years in which some of these states with low cut-off marks could not fill their quota, this development often create opportunity for any indigenes of such a state to be offered admission automatically.²⁹ This policy is borne out the need to bring about equity in ethnic ratio in the education's sector. It is therefore, not a surprise that Yoloje contends that the practice emanated from 'reasoned compromise'.^{23,30} It is meant to bridge the age-long gap in educational attainment between the geopolitical south and north.³¹ It is essential to note that the quota system principle is not limited to admission into the unity schools in Nigeria (secondary schools) it is also extended to higher institutions in the country. For instance Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) now Unify Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) in charge of admission into the universities in the country first applied quota system in 1983 even though admission based on quota system was not the original idea. Thus, admission into universities that year followed these order merit (40%), locality (30%), educational less developed (ELD) (20%) and discretion (10%) by the six oldest universities in the country. The universities were: the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife and University of Lagos from (South-West), Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (North-West), University of Benin (South-South), and University of Nsukka (South-East). The guidelines for the second generation universities (which are University of Calabar, (South-South) University of Ilorin (North-Central), University of Jos (North-Central), University of Maiduguri (North-East), University of Port Harcourt (South-South) and Uthman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto (North-West) were as follows: merit (30%), locality (30%), ELD (30%) and discretion (10%). There was a scheme of inducement grants for compliance and penalty for non-compliance.³²

All the states in Nigeria are grouped into catchment areas of each university. In most cases, the geographical and/or socio-cultural areas are contiguous to the institution to which candidate apply. Students who fall within the catchment areas of the university are given consideration for admission. Federally-owned universities normally have all the states of the federation as their catchment areas, while state-owned institutions have all local government areas of their states as their catchment area. Twenty per cent is strictly reserved for the educationally-less-developed states (ELDS) that is indigenous secondary school graduates from the states that are often specially considered for admission with lower cut-off marks on the JAMB examination.³³ The formula for admission into federal universities, polytechnic and colleges of education are as follows: merit 40%, states quota 30%, catchment zone 20% and discretion 10%.²⁶ The educationally less developed states are: Kaduna, Adamawa, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Ebonyi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Rivers Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe and Zamfara. Most of the states listed above are from the northern part of the country.³⁴

In 2000, the government cancelled the discretion criterion given to the Vice-Chancellor of universities on account of its perceived abuse and the fact that it has aggravated violent cult activities in the universities. This led to the adoption of a new quota system (see table 3).

Table 3: New Admission Quota Breakdown

Criteria	New Quota System Percentage
Merit	45%
Locality	35%
Educationally less developed (ELD)	20%

Source: ³⁵

From the above it can be deduced that only 45% is based on merit the remaining 55% is based on some other factors. The implication is that a potential candidate from south-west may score 260 in JAMB, and may still not be offered admission in a southern university, while a northern candidate who scored 215 may receive offer of admission based on quota system.

Thus:

The first variable and noticeable gulf between one geographical unit of our great and diverse country and the other in the area of education and a glaring example is that of geographical north and south (...) Available social statistics have shown that over the years since independence, it is an open secret that the north has lagged and still lags behind the south in education at all levels.³¹

There seems to be no noticeable improvement in the standard of education in the north despite the quota system put in place to bring about equalization in education. For example Anya lamented that:

Despite the utilization of the concept of educational disadvantaged states for a quarter of a century, for the allocation of resources and admission into educational institutions, the so called disadvantaged state have remained disadvantaged as they were in 1975 (...) (The quota and federal character for admission) were clearly instruments of political manipulation which have proved ineffectual even for the purpose they were designed for (...) They must therefore be discarded.³⁶

The reason why the quota system and federal character principle have not improved the educational status of the north is because the northern elite have not put in their best to change the attitudinal disposition of their youths towards the viability of western education. Little wonder that Okobiah argued that assessment of data on educational imbalance is staggering and that they convey devastating information.³¹ It is necessarily so because of the act of commission or omission on the part of those that supposed to act, but chose sadly enough to watch the almost irreversible decline of the education of the north. The elite in the north have been nonchalant, pursue individual and parochial interest.

It is chagrin to discover that the people of the north seem not to understand the fact that religious education through Quranic/Islamic schools cannot be a substitute for western education. The northern people seem to give more attention to Islamic education, thereby, playing down on western education. This has in fact, contributed to low level of literacy in the area. Some scholars have however, pointed out the good side of quota system and federal character principle and as such they see reasons why it should be continued. For example, quota system and federal character principle have brought about unity, encourage learning and pursuit of academic endeavour by the states which have been discovered to have little passion for such.³⁷ The aforementioned principles ensure equitable admission into federal universities, it provides scheme to redress imbalances, real or imagined, it protects the interest of the minority and that it has helped to douse the centripetal agitations.³⁸ Others have pointed out their grave implications. For instance it can be extrapolated from the work of Moti that the quota system and federal character principle has led to the rejection of many brilliant candidates and the admission of weak ones because federally-owned institutions are compelled to give equal opportunities to all applicants.³⁴

Quota System and Federal Character Principle: Barriers to Learning in Nigeria

One of the grave implications of these principles is that in the course of bridging the gap between the educationally disadvantaged states and educationally advantaged states is that it is detrimental to the interest of the educationally advantaged states. This is because meritocracy tend to be subverted and as such, less qualified people are admitted.³³ For God sake, why should brilliant students from the south be denied admission in order to give room for candidates from the north who may not apply to even fill their quota? Slots are reserved for candidates from educationally disadvantaged states, when these slots are not filled as they as they always are not, they become wasted in that academic year when in actual facts thousands of qualified candidates were denied admission for the fact that they were from educationally advantaged states.³⁷ The quota system and federal character principle are great barriers to learning in the sense that there is nothing like equality of states which the aforementioned mechanisms seem to address. “There is no greater inequality than the equal treatment of unequal”.³⁹

Moti has also pointed out the evil in the quota system by saying that by the quota system, a candidate in southern states, considered to be educationally advantaged, who scores 300 out of 400, may not gain admission into the university, while his or her counterpart in the north who scores less may get admission. He stated further that although it is good to encouraged the educationally disadvantaged, it should not be at the detriment of others.³⁴

Kanyip submits that inability of a candidate to gain admission to college or university based on his or her state origin is unjustifiable.³³ Using the quota system as an instrument to regulate access to university education is fraught with inequitable implication of reducing the opportunities of admission for highly qualified applicants.

Onwubiko sees it as gross injustice for the federal government to use the collective resources to run the educational institutions only to deny the brilliant and serious minded candidates of admission into higher institutions to actualize their dreams. He sees it as an indirect way of sowing violent revolution in the future as there is a limit of tolerance by youths denied opportunity to acquire higher education which can translate to better standard of living in the future.⁴⁰ It is even sadder to discover that much of the resources in running the affairs of the country come from the south who suffer most from the application of quota system. Besides, the system does not give room for competition.

Recommendations

At the time of introduction of the quota system and federal character principle, 1958 and 1979 respectively, they appeared to be the ideal responses to the challenges created by the heterogeneity of the Nigerian state. However, as our analysis has shown, these policies can no longer be applauded in the light of contemporary realities. These actualities form the basis of our recommendations.

First of all, there is the need to review these policies. In the quest to encourage the educationally disadvantaged states, the implementation of policies should not be done at the expense of the other states. To this extent, the sanctity of the educational system shouldn't be sacrifice on the altar of ethnic representation. Put succinctly, merit must remain the major criterion for educational advancement.

Also, this study suggests the revisiting and enforcing of the policy of free and compulsory education that was introduced during the Obasanjo administration in 1976. This suggestion finds credence on the basis that series of efforts that were made to boost the education in the north have yielded insignificantly. These attempts include the introduction of nomadic education which practically took education to the cattle grazing fields in order to accommodate the nomadic culture of the Northern people. In addition, total sponsorship and financial and other incentives were given to Northern students desiring education. These packages include free tuition, free books, free meals, monthly allowances. Despite these efforts by the government, the north has not been able to exhaustively utilize its allocated quota. This has created

a scenario of under-utilisation of educational facilities and opportunities in the North and over-utilisation of same in the south. Furthermore, this study stresses the need for extensive educational infrastructural development in order to accommodate the growing population of eligible students in the country.

Conclusion

This study has examined the quota system and federal character principles in educational sector with particular focus on federal unity schools. The study acknowledges that while these twin policies may have addressed the issue of representation at the national level, they however have been serious barriers to learning in Nigeria. Based on the above submission, some recommendations were made which include the need to review the policies in a way that will bring about improvement in the educational status of the educationally disadvantaged states, while on the other hand not injurious to those in vantage position as far as education is concerned in the country.

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