



**Admission Practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN): A Solution to the Challenges of Education Access in Nigeria**

**Pratiques D'admission De L'universite Nationale Ouverte Du Nigeria (NOUN) : Une Solution Aux Defis D'admission A L'universite Au Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

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*The study investigated the admission Practices of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in addressing the challenges of access, gender equity and promotion of federal character principle. The study population comprised 1425 academic and non-academic staff of NOUN in which 6 samples were purposely selected from the population. Interview protocol and documents were used for data collection. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using case study design. Data analysis involved thematic and content analysis via computer assisted software Nvivo 11. The results obtained indicated admission practices of NOUN were a combination of merit based, open access and computerized system of admission which made it possible for every applicant to be admitted without barrier. The result also revealed that although the practice of admission in NOUN had all that is required to address the challenge of access to university education, fear of acceptance, cost, technophobia and lack of awareness were the major reasons that impeded on access to NOUN. The findings also revealed that admission practices of NOUN addressed the challenges of gender equity in accessing university education by democratizing access to education, providing equal access opportunity to applicants and giving freedom to those restricted due to social conditions and the practices also circumvented*

*geographical, religious and ethnic barriers, the process properly reflected the doctrine of federal character principle. The study recommends that Government should empower the institution to operate to its full capacity so that its vision will be fully realized. NOUN, Government and other stake holders should embark on massive sensitization to educate the public on the operation of the university and candidates who have lost out in the admission process of conventional universities should be encouraged to apply in NOUN instead of wasting so many years trying to pursue admission in conventional Universities.*

### **Résumé**

*L'article a étudié les pratiques d'admission de l'Université Nationale Ouverte du Nigeria (NOUN) pour relever les défis de l'accès, de l'équité entre les sexes et de la promotion du principe de caractère fédéral. La population étudiée comprend 1425 membres du personnel académique et non académique de NOUN, dans lesquels 6 échantillons ont été choisis à dessein parmi la population. Le protocole d'entrevue et les documents ont été utilisés pour la collecte de données. L'étude a adopté une approche de recherche qualitative utilisant la conception instrumentale d'étude de cas. L'analyse des données implique l'analyse thématique et de contenu via le logiciel assisté par ordinateur Nvivo 11. Les résultats obtenus indiquent que les pratiques d'admission de NOUN sont une combinaison de systèmes d'admission fondés sur le mérite, d'accès libre et d'informatisation qui a permis à chaque demandeur d'être admis sans obstacle. Le résultat a également révélé que, bien que la pratique de l'admission à NOUN ait tout ce qu'il faut pour relever le défi de l'accès à l'enseignement universitaire, la peur de l'acceptation, le coût, la technophobie et le manque de sensibilisation sont les principales raisons qui empêchaient l'accès à NOUN. Les résultats ont également révélé que les pratiques d'admission de NOUN ont abordé les défis de l'équité entre les sexes dans l'accès à l'enseignement universitaire en démocratisant l'accès à l'éducation, en offrant des chances d'accès égal aux candidats et en donnant la liberté à ceux qui sont exclus en raison des conditions sociales et en contournant également les barrières géographiques, religieuses et ethniques. Le processus reflète correctement la doctrine du principe de caractère fédéral. L'étude recommande que le*

*gouvernement donne à l'institution les moyens de fonctionner à pleine capacité afin que sa vision soit pleinement réalisée. NOUN, le gouvernement et d'autres acteurs devraient se lancer dans une sensibilisation massive pour éduquer le public sur le fonctionnement de l'université et les candidats qui ont perdu dans le processus d'admission des universités conventionnelles devraient être encouragés à postuler à NOUN au lieu de gaspiller tant d'années à essayer de poursuivre l'admission dans les universités conventionnelles.*

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**Keywords:** *Admission practices, access to university education, gender equity, federal character principle, NOUN*

## **Introduction**

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was initially established on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 1983 as a spring-board for Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria. However, it was suspended on the 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1984. Later, in recognition of its tremendous role in tackling the country's educational problems and providing access to education for all, it was resuscitated on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2002, specifically, the University was established to increase access of all Nigerians to formal and non-formal education in a manner that is convenient to their circumstances (NOUN Annual Report, 2015).

The Vision of the University is to be regarded as the foremost University providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers and its mission is to provide functional, cost effective, flexible learning which adds lifelong value to quality education for all who seek knowledge (NOUN Profile, 2017).

The practice of admission into programmes in NOUN is open and flexible with regard to JAMB requirements and age (Aminu, 2015). The admission is not conditioned by the minimum Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination/Post Unified Tertiary Matriculation

Examination (UTME/PUTME) scores and post UTME Examinations but consider the minimum of O level requirements as spelt out in the conventional system. The entry procedure is relaxed and open in distance, time and space. Admissions are basically on e-platform, after submitting an application form online, the system analyses the information supplied and grant instant admission if one is qualified. Students are admitted into the various academic programmes in NOUN's Faculties based on the minimum academic standard for all universities that was approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2005).

The need for access to University education has recently become vital in Nigeria as a result of an increase in the University-age population and an awareness of the role of University education in the development of the individual as well as the nation (Kanyap, 2013). The provision of quality education to millions has been one of the struggles facing developing countries such as Nigeria. Experiences both nationally and internationally have shown that conventional education is extremely hard pressed to meet the demands of today's socio educational milieu especially for developing countries like Nigeria (Okoroma, 2008).

Gender equality is a system where both sexes enjoy the same opportunities for realizing their human rights and right to contribute in all spheres of national development and benefit from such development (Sadker & Sadker in Chibuogwu, 2014). An equitable education system can redress the effect of broader social and economic inequalities. In the context of learning, it allows individuals to take full advantage of education and training irrespective of their background (Woessmann & Schütz, 2006; Field, Kuczera & Pont, 2007; Faubert, 2012). Promoting gender equity in university education ensures that male and female have the opportunity to develop their full potentials and realize their human rights. University education is the foundation of women empowerment and the best strategy to develop the potentials of women is to explore them to quality education at the highest level (Nwaubani, 2000). Moreover, reducing gender inequality leads to low infant and child mortality, improved nutrition, higher economic productivity and faster growth (World Bank, 2001).

Similar to the Gender equality issue, is the issue of federal character. The term ‘federal character’ refers to a federal policy which enjoins public authorities, semi-government agencies, institutions of learning and even the private sectors to ensure and be seen to ensure fair and effective representation of State or Local Government areas or ethnic groups in positions of power, authority, placement in enrolment into schools and so on. The Federal Character Policy has its root from section 14 of 1979 constitution and re-enacted in section 14 of 1999 constitution and states:

*The composition of the government of the Federation or any of its agencies and conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.*

This statement depicts that public authorities, educational institutions and private sectors should ensure fair representation of states, local government area and even ethnic groups in position of authority and power, admission into schools, etc. The Federal Character Commission (1996), tries to articulate and summarize the concept of federal character when it says, “that the consciousness of the doctrine demonstrates itself in practically every aspect of political, socio-cultural and economic lives of the country”

In order to regulate admissions into the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria the Federal Government initiated and promoted a federal character policy which gave rise to the concept of equalization of opportunity in university education (Okoroma, 2008). The federal character policy implies that public authorities, government agencies, institutions of learning and even the private sector should ensure fair and effective representation of states or local government areas or ethnic groups in positions of power, authority, placement in enrolment into schools and so on (Adejo in Okoroma, 2008). Furthermore, one of the goals of higher education in Nigeria is to contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training (NPE,

2004). Thus, for the country to achieve balanced national development, the doctrine of Federal Character Policy has to be properly applied, all ethno-regional areas, groups and communities will be given equal opportunity to participate in the socio-economic and political life. Open and Distance Learning provides affordable, cost effective and flexible educational opportunities for all and this is why it is recommended for balanced national development in Nigeria (Osuji, 2010). If the country continues to abandon vast majority of its population outside of the sphere of educational opportunities, it makes the country, and of course the world, not only less just, but less secure (Jegede, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nigeria gained independence in 1960; the higher education enrollment was 2000 within a handful of institutions, including the University of Ibadan and the university of Nigeria, Nsuka (UNN) (Kanyip, 2013). By 2010, the number of universities had risen to 104, with a 1.5 million student enrollment (Okebukola, 2010). However, this continued growth of higher education has been accompanied by problems such as strains on budgets and facilities, low standards, and limited capacity to accommodate the growing demand for postsecondary education (Okebukola, 2010; Sawyerr, 2004).

The demand for university education in recent times has increased phenomenally. Every graduate of post-primary institution is desirous of having University admission, this phenomenon depicts that, perhaps, and people have realized the importance of university education in one's life as a means for social mobility, self-development and self-actualization. More so, that education has the capacity to promote healthy lifestyle and it is satisfying in itself. Beyond this consumption perception of education, it equally has the capacity of increasing one's economic peculiarly value (Nwadiani, & Agbineweka 2005). Apart from this investment angle of education, it is important to state that there seems to be a general perception among the Nigerian people that only University degree can promise a good future (Ehiamentor, 2005). According to him the demand for University education has reached an unprecedented high level that more than double the current number of Universities in the country will be required to fill this gap.

According to JAMB registration statistics of 2015, about 1,475,477 candidates registered for JAMB UTME (Computer Based Test) seeking opportunities to enter into universities across the country. Regrettably, the available Universities in the country could not provide all the opportunities for those yearning for University education. This lack of capacity of conventional Universities to cope with admission demand led to the existence of Open University as an innovative and cost effective approach to the educative process. Thus the issue of access to University education has become a serious one (Fabunmi, 2005).

Education is a means by which a nation equips her citizens for all round development. However, researches have proved that female gender in higher education and equitable access rate in Nigeria is quite unimpressive. For instance, the cumulative under-graduate enrolment overtime in Nigeria from 1980 – 1999 revealed that there is a great disparity between enrolment of male and female (Anho & Onojetah, 2007).

Wrong application of Federal Character principle by the Federal Government and its agencies is drawing Nigeria backwards rather than propelling it to grow and make progress in the comity of nations (Daniel, 2013). Federal character principle believed to promote a sense of belonging, patriotism and loyalty to the nation. However, in Nigerian Universities, the Federal character principle has only managed to further deepen disunity, promote incompetence, advance inequity, sectional nepotism and corruption (Igwe, 2012).

The establishment of NOUN may offer great chances for qualified candidates who are lost out in the admission processes of the conventional universities and persons who, due to their social condition, are traditionally excluded from attending conventional universities in Nigeria (Tenebe, 2016). This study sought to investigate into the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and find out if it addresses the problems of access, gender equity and promotion of federal character scheme in Nigerian university education. The above scenario paints serious problem of

university admission and access problems in the Nigeria higher education system. How does NOUN admission process help to solve these in relation to equity, and male/female admission debate? This is the problem the study intends to investigate and proffer solution.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study was to investigate into the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) with reference to access, gender equity, federal character, and NUC quality standard. The specific objectives include; -

1. To find out whether admission practices in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) have the capacity to address the challenge of access to university education in Nigeria.
2. To find out whether admission practices in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) have the capacity to address the challenge of gender equity in accessing university education in Nigeria.
3. To find out whether admission practices in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) promote the use of federal character scheme in accessing university education in Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) address the challenge of access to university education in Nigeria?
2. How do the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) address gender equity in accessing University education in Nigeria?
3. How do the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) promote the use of federal character scheme in accessing university education in Nigeria?



## **Methodology**

### **Design of the Study**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. The design that was used for this study was instrumental case study. Instrumental case study involves study of a case in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition (Creswell, 2012).

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were all academic and senior non-academic staff from National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The sampling technique used in this research is purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

The reason for carrying out purposeful sampling is that the people who have been selected for the sampling have been selected with a particular purpose in mind (those involved in the issues of admission and its practices). The participants in this study were two Administrative staff, two Academic staff and two staff from Learner Support Services (LSS) who spent 10 years and above in the service of NOUN.

### **Instrument for Data Collection/ Validation**

The instruments used for data collection were Interview and document. In qualitative research, the approach relies on general interviews or observations so that you do not restrict the view of participants, the researcher, therefore need to collect data with few open-ended questions he designs (Creswell, 2012), Interview was used as a primary instrument for data collection. It was conducted in a semi structured form, with few open-ended questions on how the Administrative staff, Academic staff and staff of learner support services respond to admission issues. The interview took place in private places (participant's home, office, or in any conducive place in NOUN).

### **Reliability of the Instrument**

Triangulation and member checking were used to establish the reliability in this study. Qualitative reliability refers to the researcher's

approach being consistent across different researchers and different projects (Creswell, 2012).

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The analysis procedure used for this qualitative approach was based on the two data sources that the researcher collected: interviews and document. For the interview thematic analysis was used, and document was analysed using content analysis.

The computer qualitative data analysis software NVivo 11 (QRS international Pty Ltd) for windows, NVivo Plus 2015 edition was used to facilitate the coding and perform complex searches that would be very time consuming if done manually (Creswell, 2012). The computer software program helped the coding process by coding, generating themes, and sorting information for the analysis as the researcher will go through each line of the text and assigned codes (Creswell, 2012).

The transcripts for all the participants were formatted in terms of paragraph style for the purpose of auto coding using NVivo 11 software. Auto coding automatically assigned relevant information to specified nodes/codes. It is a way of recognizing data for further analysis, with auto coding, headings with the same name and level across the transcripts were group into node. All the research questions were formatted to Heading I and the interview questions were formatted to Heading II and the responses were formatted to Normal.

The transcribed data was sorted and coded using NVivo 11 software. NVivo is a Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) computer package produced by QSR international. It has been designed for qualitative researchers working with very rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required (McNiff, 2016).

The formatted transcripts were imported into the NVivo 11 software, using auto coding function, the software organized and grouped the interview questions and responses of the participants based on research questions. Query functions such as word frequency and word tree were used to identify nodes/codes.

Codes were validated using Compound query provided by NVivo 11 software; this helped to find the content in the data sources that is close to other content. For example, a combination of text search query with a coding query was used to search for text in or near the coded content and a combination of two text search queries was also used to search for content where one term precedes another to make sure that no any important content was omitted.

Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question (Daly & Gliksman, 1997). The themes become the categories for analysis (Fereday & Elimear, 2006). In Nvivo software Parent Nodes are used instead of themes and Nodes are used instead of codes.

Sub themes were developed by identifying relevant information in the data using search query functions, the information identified were assigned words and phrases (concepts) that best represented the relevant information making sure that they are consistent with the research questions and were documented accordingly (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The themes were developed based on the content of the relevant information identified. Table 1 shows a summary of the emerging themes and sub themes.

**Table 1: Three Major Emerging Themes, Subthemes and Research questions**

Major Themes	Emerging sub themes	Research Questions
1 ADMISSION PRACTICES OF NOUN ADDRESSES THE CHALLENGE OF ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA	<p><b>Admission in NOUN</b> Do you have the requirement? “merit based admission”</p> <p>Open access: the just system of admission.</p> <p>Computer base admission: corruption free system, Cut down distance</p> <p><b>Impediments on access to NOUN admission</b> Fear of acceptance Fear of cost Technophobia Lack of awareness</p> <p><b>NOUN Admission versus Gender Equity</b> Freedom of access</p> <p>Democratizing Access; equality of opportunity</p> <p>Fair procedure of admission</p> <p><b>NOUN Admission versus Federal Character Scheme</b> Demolishes geographic barrier Demolishes quarter system Demolishes religious barrier Demolishes ethnic dichotomy</p>	<p>How do the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) address the challenge of Access to University education in Nigeria?</p> <p>How do the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) address gender equity in accessing University education in Nigeria?</p> <p>How do the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) promote the use of federal character scheme?</p>

## **Theme 1: Admission Practices of NOUN Addresses the Challenge of Access to University Education in Nigeria**

This section explores the reality of the admission practices of NOUN toward addressing the challenge of access in Nigerian University education. The participants (administrative staff, academic staff and learner support services staff) spent at least ten years in the service of NOUN at the time of the study. In the following section, the participants' accounts demonstrated their experiences with NOUN admission practices and their perception on the practices addressing challenge of access to University education in Nigeria.

### **Admission in NOUN**

#### **Do you have the requirement? “Merit based admission”**

Satisfaction concerning the admission issue of “Do you have the requirement” which is Referred to as “Merit based admission”, emerged as one of the most prominent subthemes. When the participants were asked to describe how they felt about the practices of admission in NOUN that promote access and the reasons for denial of admission, it was common for them to express their feelings about the simplicity of gaining admission into the University due to the syndrome of merit based. Merit based is seen as a process of admitting candidates that have the qualification for the programme they applied. Interviews with Garus, Momy and Barkama in the following passages reveal merit based admission as one of the practices of admission in NOUN:

Merit based admission practice changes the who you know phenomenon that established itself firmly in the admission process of Nigeria as a guiding principle in contemporary Nigerian society, extending to all sectors, including education, whereby University admission is not determined based on merit but also on who you know that is influential in the society. In NOUN your admission is processed by computer, and you cannot lobby computer to admit you if you are short of qualifications. Therefore, this allows the system open for all (Interview with Garus).

Admission process in NOUN is objective and transparent; it is based on merit; this has reduced pressure from family and friends regarding admissions because when they come for admission the first question that will be asked is do you have the requirement of the programme you are proposing, as the system grants admission based on academic requirement of the programme applied (Interview with Momy).

Admission in NOUN is processed by computer which does not know you but your requirement; therefore, any candidate that meets the requirement will be automatically admitted. This is telling you that the system is ready to accommodate all qualified candidates that are lost out in the admission process of the conventional universities in Nigeria and persons who due to their social conditions, are traditionally excluded from attending conventional Universities (Interview with Barkama).

The three participants confirmed that NOUN admission is based on merit and only candidates who made a programme requirement would be admitted.

### **Open Access: The Just System of Admission**

The open access refers to equal opportunity. Equal opportunity among other things, means meeting the individuals where he or she is and attending to his or her educational dream; The system thus helps the individuals to develop from this point onward to attain what he or she had hither-to thought was unattainable. Equal opportunity also means that when you apply to NOUN, no matter your credentials, the University is prepared to meet you there and if need be help you gradually through the series of foundation (Access) courses, certificates and Diploma programmes to get you up to the point of matriculation where and when you can actually begin your degree programme. This is revealed in the following passages:

NOUN has an open process of admission; the system gives room for applicants to come in, provided the candidate is ready to be placed according to his requirement, is based on merit and if at the time you are applying, you are not basically qualified for a

degree programme, the University through the Learner Support Services staff will appropriately counsel you to go into Access programme which will eventually prepare you for your degree course. You see it is a just system of admission (Interview with Garus).

Admission into NOUN cyclical is a nonstop process, and it is merit based. Application for admission is accepted throughout the year, therefore, candidates can apply at any time within the year and admission will be granted instantly. The application is online, is computer based, no human intervention if you are qualified you will be admitted. The requirement for each course is uploaded on the system once you apply the system will analyse the information supplied and grant admission to you. So it is a just system of admission. If you are qualified, you will not be denied admission. (Interview with Momy).

NOUN has no limit for admissions. This means that it can take as many candidates as possible, so if Nigerians can realize the opportunities in NOUN the challenge of access to university education will be greatly reduced. If you miss admission in conventional system you always have an alternative (Interview with Keto).

The above interviews revealed that NOUN admission has open and accessible based on candidates' qualifications. The system is ready to accept candidates that are qualified directly to the deserved level and those that have deficiencies in their requirement will get access through foundation courses called access. Access programme are courses you can take if you do not directly qualify for admission into a degree programme (NOUN, 2007).

### **Computer Based Admission: Corruption Free System, Cut Down Distance**

Another practice of admission in NOUN which reduced the challenge of access into University education as revealed by this study is computer based admission; applicants got admission instantly at the point of application which completely does away with corrupt practices

when seeking university admission. This is revealed in the following passage:

The process of NOUN admission is wonderful, straight forward and just. It is computer based. Applicants can choose to submit their applications at their convenience. All that is required is access to a computer and Internet connectivity. Messy handwriting, lack of postal connectivity, distance, delay in processing etc. are unlikely to disrupt the application process. This is a great advantage to candidates in rural areas and candidates with disabilities (Interview with Dingo).

The computer based admission system is highly reliable and efficient and eliminates chances of errors. It offers applicants a uniform platform for filling in their applications; the system gives equal access (opportunity) to all and it is just as I have said earlier merit is central to the process. It is also open to all Nigerians irrespective of your location or religion. You will be admitted from anywhere; the system removes distance in admission (Interview with Keto).

The above interviews revealed that, the online application process offers the university applicants a uniform platform for filling in their applications and also provides prompts on which fields are mandatory. The computer based admission system is highly reliable and efficient and eliminates chances of errors.

## **Impediments on Access to NOUN Admission**

### **Fear of Acceptance**

One of the sub themes that was identified by the participants when asked about the reasons that impede on access in NOUN is fear of acceptance. Fear of acceptance refers to the recognition of NOUN certificate for employment and admission purposes. The participants revealed that NOUN is a new system in Nigeria and the Nigerian public is always sceptical of anything new. This is evident from the frequently asked questions by prospective applicants and even the regular students



as to whether NOUN certificate are recognized? This is revealed in the following passages:

The University is unique and new in Nigeria and people doubt it. And this is usual, I can give you examples, University of Ibadan at inception was a college of University of London from 1948-1962 and all its programmes, as expected, were British oriented. When University of Nigeria, Nsukka came on board in 1962 without being affiliated to any foreign university for tutelage (a novel idea), many felt that it was an experiment in error. Many people were sceptical of its certificates, more so as the university was not British oriented. Universities of Jos and Ilorin used to be satellite campuses of University of Ibadan while University of Calabar was a satellite campus of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. When they were to become autonomous (Calabar in 1973; Jos in 1975 and Ilorin in 1977), many described them as “glorified secondary schools” whose certificates cannot gain international recognition. College of Education Abraka, (now Delta State University), was initially affiliated to University of Benin. When the College was merged with Ekpoma in 1986, most students were worried that Ekpoma certificates would be inferior to those of Benin and that they would be discriminated against in the labour market.

I can go on and on with other similar examples. All I have been trying to point out is that the Nigerian public is always sceptical of anything new. The fear currently being expressed by the public about NOUN is quite normal and expected but not real. Cost and technology are other areas of concern by applicants. They will tell you this university is for big people like Obasanjo and so on (Interview with Keto)

### **Fear of cost**

Another sub theme that was identified by the participants when asked about the reasons that impede on access in NOUN is fear of cost which refers to the feeling induced from the perception that NOUN require huge amount of investment in terms of monetary value. Interview with participants revealed that prospective applicants always expressed

wrong impression about the aspect of cost involved in running a programme in NOUN. This is revealed in the following passage:

NOUN applicants always expressed wrong impression about the aspect of cost involved in running a programme in NOUN. The applicants during interaction always expressed shock on the cost involved and they are eager to know the cost implication of running the prospective programme. When the applicants were briefed on the cost implication, they normally expressed their bad feelings for not joining the university earlier than the time they come or express their misperception about the cost of running a programme in NOUN. This misperception makes it a barrier to some candidates not to enrol in NOUN and will continue to struggle for admission in conventional Universities (Interview with Garus).

### **Technophobia**

Technophobia is the constant and persistent fear of technology and, in greater depth, is defined as the feeling of severe anxiety associated with using anything technologically advanced. Sometimes, the fear can be a rational response when it comes to new technology; fear of the unknown and how it will impact your role within an organization is a legitimate feeling. People fear new technology and the fear of giving up what they are comfortable with in exchange for the unknown. Technophobia is different from most other specific phobias in that; the phobic is mainly ignorant and does not welcome change. They simply do not understand technology as a result of which they not only fear it but also shun it. This is revealed in an interview with Dingo as follows:

Fear of technology may be among the reasons that impede on access in NOUN, I have many applicants who confess to me that they want to join NOUN but the technology involved is their problem. You have to take time and explain to them that the system does not require much computing skills, all that is needed is the technique of clicking and moving the cursor. This in a great way affects some candidates from enrolling. I do understand again, that people are not well informed about the system. They will be asking you is NOUN certificate being recognized? Will I

continue my studies with NOUN certificate? This proves to you how ignorant people are about the system (Interview with Dingo).

Technology is often paradoxical: it is meant to make our life easier, but sometimes it actually complicates it further by making the devices harder to use and learn. Technophobes tend to fear precisely these factors. They believe that, when faced with complex computers, telephone systems, or even Automatic Teller Machines, they might have to deal with complex set of instructions. The average individual usually finds these sets of instructions easy to follow, but in case of Technophobia, the person simply freezes. S/he is so panic-stricken at the thought of using the device that they suffer a mild panic attack. Often they realize that their fears are without any basis, but they are completely powerless over it. Needless to say; this fear of technology is highly limiting and can affect the individual's day-to-day life. Human-machine interaction always raises human fear of the unknown. Again, it is easier to observe this when children first attempt to control and steer a sophisticated technology, such as a bicycle or an automobile.

### **Lack of awareness**

Lack of awareness is another sub theme identified by the participants when asked about the reasons that impede on access in NOUN. Many people lack knowledge about the operation of NOUN probably because it is new in the country. Interview with Barkama revealed information concerning lack of awareness as an impediment that hinder access to NOUN as follows:

There are numerous misconceptions about National Open University of Nigeria. This is informed by the novelty of open distance learning system in Nigeria. This ignorance has slowed down the decision of many prospective applicants to avail themselves of the opportunities inherent in the system. Some misconceive the university as an exclusive preserve of the rich. Some think it is not recognized. Some think it is owned by a private organization and some other people believe it is meant for graduate students only. However, each of these interpretations is

a pointer to the profundity of people's ignorance about the university (Interview with Barkama).

### **Findings from Documents**

NOUN Portal, NOUN news, NOUN Management Information System (NOUMIS) and NOUN annual reports provided documentary evidences that support the finding of this study. Statistics from NOUMIS revealed that from January to June, 2017 (First Semester), the University admitted 15591 students across the country. This number is considered low considering the openness of the system. Yobe State with one Study Centre has only 17 admitted students which is the least in the country followed by Gombe State also with one Study Centre having only 28 admitted students. These numbers are grossly inadequate for the Centres. The Centres have spaces to mop up the candidates that are lost out in the admission process of conventional universities and those who could not attend conventional universities due to social conditions. This confirmed that the centres have the capacity to address the challenge of access to university education in the States but the turnout is very low may be as a result of the impediment on access to NOUN as revealed by the respondents.

### **Theme 2: Admission Practices of NOUN Address Gender Equity in Accessing University Education in Nigeria**

This section addresses the second research question: How do the admission practices of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) address gender equity in accessing University education in Nigeria? Gender equality refers to a situation where women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potentials; are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social and cultural development and benefit equally from the results. Furthermore, it entails that the underlying causes of discrimination are systematically identified and removed in order to give men and women equal opportunities.

Equality is therefore understood to include both formal equality and substantive equality, and not merely simple equality to men. This section presents the information on how admission practices of NOUN

address gender mix in accessing University education. The findings brought out certain themes as some of the major practices, and these themes are presented based on the participant responses.

### **NOUN Admission versus Gender Free from Restriction Due to Social Conditions**

The practices of admission in NOUN give men and women equal chances to access university education. The respondents revealed that admission into NOUN is free from restriction; both men and women have equal chances. This is revealed in an interview with Momy as follows:

NOUN is free from restriction, both men and women have equal chances; if you apply for admission, the system will analyze your information and grant instant admission to you. The system also gives room for the people who are restricted due to social conditions to come in, these categories of people may include among others women in purdah, prisoners, traders, farmers and rural folks (Interview with Momy).

The purdah system restricts women from access to education, Purdah literally means curtain or veil, and refers to the various modes of shielding women from the sight primarily of men (other than their husbands or men of their natal family). With the practices of admission in NOUN such women can apply and be admitted without interacting with any man. Prisoners have a similar scenario with women in purdah; they are domesticated in a place. Processing admission via conventional way would have been difficult for them and it is now easier for them to get it with NOUN. Traders, Farmers and rural folks sometimes find it difficult to manage their schedules and at the same time looking for admission which may demand their time, but can now be admitted without stress in NOUN because of the computerized system of admission.

### **Democratizing Access; Equality of Opportunity and Access**

The practice of open access in NOUN has been considered germane in democratizing access to University education and it is identified by the

participants as one of the ways of reducing gender inequality in University education. Momy revealed that:

Both men and women can apply at the own convenience, time and space. The University has a mandate to increase access to good quality education through comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. To ensure this, no entrance examination or UTME score are required, and the admission policy demands that NOUN admits all students who are considered to have a good chance of success in programmes of their choice as indicated in their applications (Interview with Momy).

### **Findings from Documents**

Statistics of undergraduate admitted students from January to June, 2017 as revealed by NOUMIS indicated that out of the 15591 admitted students across the country, 7549 which constituted 48.4% were females while 8041 which represented 51.6% were males. This shows that the difference in gender enrolment is less than 2% which is a strong indication for gender equity in accessing University education.

### **Theme 3: Admission Practices of NOUN Promote the Use of Federal Character Principle.**

This section deals with research question Three: How do the Admission Practices of NOUN promote the use of federal character scheme. The Federal Character Commission Act was promulgated in 1995 and later fused into the 1999 Constitution in the wake of agitations for fair share of political positions across the country. In the guiding principles and formula for the distribution of all cadres of posts including admissions in universities across the country, the Act stipulates in its part one that “ Each state of the federation and the federal capital territory shall be equitably represented in all national institutions and in public enterprises and organizations” and part two states that “The best and the most competent persons shall be recruited from each state of the federation to fill positions reserved for the indigenes of the states”.

The basic idea of Federal Character Scheme is to have an even representation of all states, ethnic and other sectional groups in the federal service. It was introduced to promote national unity and foster national loyalty instead of religious interests and eventually give every Nigerian a sense of belonging no matter anyone's religion, language or ethnic group.

This section presents the information on how admission practices of NOUN promote the use of federal character scheme. The findings brought out certain themes as some of the major practices, and these themes are presented based on the participants' responses.

## **NOUN Admission versus Federal character**

### **Geographic Barrier and quota system**

The respondents revealed that NOUN admission process circumvents geographic barrier. Fat when asked about admission practice in NOUN promoting the use of federal character scheme in accessing University Education said:

Yes of course, the federal character is about equal representation, is about making it possible for candidates from across the country to apply to university and be admitted without any hassles. If access will be given to all candidates from across the country, then federal character scheme has been achieved (Interview with Fat).

NOUN admission practices eliminate the inconveniences caused by ailments and others, providing deserving candidates a convenience that has never before been available. The spread of the study centres across the nation itself is an index of federal character. This creates an avenue for applicants to access university education from anywhere around the country as expressed by Dingo and Fat:

NOUN admission is not based on quota system; admission is purely based on merit. It does not consider your origin, religion or tribe. NOUN has 77 study centres spread across the country

which create avenue for applicants to access university education (Interview with Dingo).

NOUN admission gives equal treatment to all communities and ethno geographical areas in the country and in addition to that NOUN has study centers spread across the federation which give room for all communities to have access to university education. Anybody can apply and be admitted anywhere in the country irrespective of where you are coming from or your ethnic or religious background. The system allows every member of the community to have access to university education (Interview with Dingo).

Federal character scheme requires that there should be fair and equal representation of the various component units and communal groups of the country. The admission procedures of NOUN give room for fair and equal representation of applicants

### **Circumventing Religious and Ethnic Dichotomy in Admission**

Circumventing religious and ethnic dichotomy in NOUN admission is another sub theme identified by participants. Keto revealed that NOUN admission process is about equalization of opportunity in accessing university education when asked about the issue of Federal Character Scheme in admission of NOUN. This is revealed in the following passage:

NOUN admission process is about equalization of opportunity in accessing university education, in addition to that NOUN has study centres in all states in Nigeria including Abuja, and you can agree with me that the process will result in expanding equal access opportunity to Nigerians. So to me the doctrine of federal character scheme is properly reflected in the admission of NOUN (Interview with Keto).

Admission of NOUN circumvents geographic, religious and ethnic barriers. Applicants would be admitted irrespective of where they come from. It gives everybody equal access opportunity. Therefore, there is balance in access to university education. The essence of federal



character is balanced national development, balanced access to educational opportunities and the system of admission in NOUN, reflects the doctrine of federal character scheme.

### **Findings from Documents**

The distribution of Study Centres across the country as indicated on the map in NOUN's Annual Report (2014/2015) shows that Study Centres of NOUN are spread across all parts of the country to ensure all ethno geographical areas and communities are not marginalized in terms of accessing university education. All states of the federation have a study Centre, in addition to that institutions and Communities can request for special or Community Study Centres as the case may be. This gives room for all round participation which support the doctrine of federal character scheme.

### **Discussion**

The sub theme “merit based admission” as one of the practices of admission in NOUN emerged salient among all the participants. Merit should determine an individual's access to valuable resources. Influence conscious university admissions drive our society backwards, away from the “merit based” society that is desired by so many. Merit is what makes a student a worthwhile applicant whether that is through good character, excellent grades or test scores, or outstanding co-curricular (Thiel & Sacks, 2013).

Findings of this study suggest that open access as a practice of admission in NOUN is regarded as a just system of admission because it gives candidates equal access opportunity of gaining admission. Similar to Meyer & Bradley (2013), freedom of education attainment and its full access refers to the unbiased and robust educational opportunities at every stage, polishing of knowledge, skills, and abilities to participate in the improvement of the society. UNESCO (2003) put “access in tertiary education” as meaning “ensuring equitable access to tertiary education institutions based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance”.

Computer based admission was also identified by the participants as another practice of admission in NOUN that improves access to

university education. This is supported by the disclosure of the Vice Chancellor of NOUN Professor Abdallah Uba Adamu while fielding questions from a reporter of Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) during an interview session published in NOUN News (June, 2017), in which he said “our admission list is virtual, has no limit and we can admit 10 to 10 million students to run programmes in the University without any hitch”

The second finding revealed that admission practices of NOUN such as merit based, open access and computerized system of admission address the challenge of gender equity in accessing university education by democratizing access to education, providing equal access opportunity to applicants and giving freedom to those restricted due to social conditions. This is in tandem with Salman, Yahaya, & Adewara, (2011), who confirmed that for greater productivity and accelerated development in the nation, the males and females need to be equally empowered in all the disciplines offered in the universities as national development requires collective efforts of the citizens irrespective of gender, tribe and inclination. Globally, Open education is preferred by various people without discrimination of age, gender, race, marital status, region, income, etc. It is necessary to establish practices that will overcome the educational obstacles that limit female employment; and to develop women’s professional skills (Seda & Guler, 2014).

The third finding from this research revealed that the admission practices of NOUN circumvents geographic, religious and ethnic barriers by providing equal chance to all ethno geographical areas and communities to access university education and the process properly reflected the doctrine of federal character scheme. This is in line with Critical Theory which struggles for humanization and the breaking of cycles of injustice, exploitation, and domination which lie in the perpetuation of the oppressor against the oppressed (Freire, 1998). In these roles, those who perpetrate the injustice, the oppressors, do not only deny freedom to those they oppress, they also risk their own humanity because oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination (Freire, 1998).

## **Findings**

The study revealed the admission practices and reasons that impede on access to NOUN admission. Admission practices of NOUN are combination of merit based, open access and computerized system which makes it possible for every applicant to be admitted without barrier. The participants also revealed that although the practice of admission in NOUN has all that is required to address the challenge of access to University education, fear of acceptance, fear of cost, technophobia and lack of awareness are the major reasons that impede on access to NOUN which could have mopped up what the conventional system cannot absorb.

The findings show that admission practices of NOUN such as merit based, open access and computerized system of admission address the challenge of gender equity in accessing University education by democratizing access to education, providing equal access opportunity to applicants and giving freedom to those restricted due to social conditions.

The admission practices of NOUN circumvent geographic, religious and ethnic barriers by providing equal chance to all ethno geographical areas and communities to access university education and the process properly reflects the doctrine of federal character scheme.

## **Summary**

The main issue considered in this study was the fact that there are millions of candidates that are qualified but could not be admitted into conventional universities due to their carrying capacity. The National Open University of Nigeria is in existence to overcome the challenge which is clearly stated in its vision and the realization of this vision gets its root from the admission practices of the University.

The findings revealed that admission practices of NOUN are combination of merit based, open access and computerized system of admission which makes it possible for every applicant to be admitted without barrier. Fear of acceptance, fear of cost, technophobia and lack of awareness are the major reasons that impede on access to NOUN

which could have mopped up what the conventional system cannot absorb.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the practices of admission in NOUN can mop up the candidates that are lost out in the admission process of conventional Universities and even those who are traditionally excluded from attending conventional Universities due to social conditions.

The government, stake holders, parents, applicants and the private sectors are to put up combined effort to work together untiringly to sell the idea of NOUN as a complementary institution to conventional Universities and stem the tide of university education demand in order to improve human capital development of the nation which will in turn improve the socio economic value of the country.

### **Recommendations**

Government should empower the institution to operate to its full capacity so that the vision of the University will be fully realized.

NOUN, Government and stake holders should embark on massive sensitization to educate the public on the operation of NOUN as an institution being established to complement the effort of conventional Universities and not to compete with them and that the certificates of both systems carry the same weight.

Candidates who are lost out in the admission process of conventional Universities should be encouraged to apply in NOUN instead of wasting so many years trying to pursue admission in conventional Universities.

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