

7

Policy, Expectations and Shortfalls *Nigerian Views and Experiences*

A Jones Akinpelu

Preliminary

The focus of this chapter is on explicit government policy and its context. The perspective from the English-speaking Caribbean was one with a stress on the international nature of universities and on the issues associated with reifying international aspirations. The perspective from India is that of a large and complex national system already in some international demand, where underlying policy thrusts can be seen but where there is no overt expressed national policy. Nigeria, which has also a developed higher education system (though on a smaller scale), does have an expressed government policy. This chapter gives a brief account of its impact, possible tensions between such a policy and concepts of institutional autonomy, and the gap between expectation and practice.

It is an extract only from a longer paper which included a detailed survey of foreign student flows into Nigeria.

The international inheritance

As with the Caribbean and India, university education in Nigeria started on an international note, in accordance with the perceived traditional universal nature of universities. The first university institution, which was the University College, Ibadan, was in special relationship with the University of London, and this opened its doors to a variety of scholars from different parts of the world. This would seem to have set a pattern for the ready acceptance of the concept of internationalisation of the university campus in Nigeria.

Since those modest beginnings, there has been considerable expansion in the number of universities in the country, from one in 1948, to two in 1960, five in 1962 and 31 in 1991. This chapter deals mainly with the student aspect of the internationalisation of the Nigerian university campuses, with a view to finding out the degree of the internationalisation, what are the facilitative or constraining factors, and what could be further done to promote greater and smoother foreign student flow between the developing countries of the Commonwealth, as well as between the developed and the developing countries of the Commonwealth.

In order to study the policies of government concerning foreign students and academic exchange, information was sought from a number of agencies (see *Note* at the end of the chapter). In order to study policy implementation, a sample of nine out of the 31 universities was used. Six were selected from the oldest or first-generation universities, since they have had a longer period in which to build up international links, and three others were surveyed, on account of their proximity to neighbouring countries, which exposes them to student flows from across the borders; the latter are listed as Border Universities (see *Note*).

Government and institutional policies

The national and institutional policies on foreign students are positive, friendly and reciprocal. The government of the Federation welcomes students from all parts of the globe and in fact has a set admission quota reserved for foreign students. This has been increased from two per cent to five per cent of the annual enrolment of each university. The universities are supportive of the government policies on foreign students, in that they accept applications from any part of the world. The actual determination of whom to admit, however, rests squarely with each university, where students' admission is generally based on academic entry requirements, availability of courses applied for, the admission quota for each course, as well as the adequacy or otherwise of the human and material resources for each course. In consideration of all these, a university may or may not be able to admit foreign students up to five per cent of its annual student enrolment. On the other hand, it should be noted that, occasionally, the Federal Government may use the national selection machinery set up through the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) to place one or two students in a

university. In such cases the university has no choice but to admit a student once he/she is qualified. This happens especially with refugee students who are received as part of an agreement with a UN or other refugee agency.

The principal actors in any change in policy or negotiation for exchange schemes are the Vice-Chancellors and the Federal Ministry officials on behalf of their Ministers. In the case of bilateral agreements which involve educational, scientific, economic, cultural and technical exchanges, officials of the relevant Ministries like Education, Science and Technology, Information, Finance and Economic Development, Foreign Affairs and the Presidency play active roles in any policy change or negotiation.

The Nigerian 'climate' is generally protective of foreign students and the Federal Government is interested in encouraging the flow of foreign students into the country. Its interest stems from a dynamic foreign policy which sees Nigeria as a leading Commonwealth nation and more particularly as a leading nation on the African continent and in ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), with educational resources to be offered as part of bilateral agreements. Currently, the country has bilateral agreements in education with about 30 countries, of which the majority are African. It has also played a significant part in the education of refugees from elsewhere in Africa and has over the years taken in substantial numbers of refugees from the former Rhodesia and from South Africa and Namibia. A recent agreement was with the South African Relief Fund (SARF), which recruits and arranges admission for about 30 young men and women annually from South Africa and Namibia.

This is the policy nationally. It is generally believed that the political, social and cultural situation within Nigeria is favourable to foreign students, especially to the African students who are in the majority. African students integrate easily and move freely about since it is not easy to distinguish them from Nigerians.

Institutional policies in all the universities surveyed were reported to be favourable to foreign students. Nigerian universities offer some guidance and counselling through university registries, although only two of the nine institutions studied have a designated foreign students' office. In general, they offer foreign students:

- reserved admission space
- reserved accommodation
- fee rescheduling

Some assist with visa processing and some offer special English language programmes.

The factors favouring and hindering foreign student flows will be discussed later. Here we will discuss the application and implementation of the national and institutional policy.

Foreign enrolments: Statistics

Enrolments have fluctuated considerably over the last few years and it seems unlikely that they have ever approached the Federal Government's five per cent target, which in 1988–89 would have been 8,600, given the total enrolment at all Nigerian universities of 172,464 students. The rather small numbers may be deduced from Table 7.1.

The figures are only complete for 1989–90. Data for all years are available for only four of the institutions (UNN, UNL, UDU, and ABU), which receive the largest cohorts of foreign students, accounting for 656 or 97 per cent of the total of 678 recorded for 1989–90. Only one of the Border Universities, the University of Calabar, received more than 50 foreign students that year.

There is cause for belief that there is now an upward trend, although numbers of foreigners are nowhere near the maximum for the estimated capacity available to them. Meanwhile, it is discouraging to note also that similar results are obtained in respect of Commonwealth awards tenable in Nigerian Universities, as the figures in Table 7.2 show.

The most successful of the schemes through which foreign students flow into the country appears to be that organised through the South African Relief Fund. Although small-scale, it provides a model for success. It works well because it has a clear mandate to train a specific number of South African and Namibian students each year. It has strong political support in the Presidency, to which it is attached. It has adequate funds and a strong secretariat. SARF handles all placements, and also all arrangements for accommodation and food. Other bilateral award schemes do seem to work, but affect quite small numbers also. It was observed that 70 per cent of foreign students currently in Nigeria are privately sponsored.

Very few of the foreign students in the country are from the industrialised and post-industrial countries. Those received came usually from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and make up only about one per cent of the foreign students in Nigeria. By contrast, between 60 to 70 per cent of the foreign students in Nigeria are

Cameroonians. Others came in trickles from the following countries: Botswana, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Niger, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Uganda. Most come for undergraduate programmes and enter courses in Medicine, Science and Technologies.

Factors affecting foreign student flows

Students from other African countries find it easy to adjust to Nigerian life. It was noted at the University of Calabar that:

... most of the foreign students come from Cameroon, from where they just walk across the border to the University. Many of them do not bother to observe any immigration formalities, since they bear names similar to Nigerian names and are black like Nigerians. Some just make use of plain travel permits obtained from the Nigerian embassy.

The reluctance of students from the North may be due to extreme poverty of information on academic standards in Nigerian universities, but it is believed that students from other developing countries find it easier to adjust to the socio-cultural conditions of the country than those from the industrial and post-industrial parts of the world.

One deterrent to all students from abroad is economic and is attributed to the effects of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) of the Federal Government. The prices of goods and services are very high and it has become increasingly difficult for foreign students to manage on their awards or private money. Neither the Federal Government nor universities have organised subsidies or top-up support schemes and fee-waivers are only offered to students on exchange programmes.

At the same time, although Nigerian universities have the theoretical capacity to take in larger numbers of foreign students (10,000 would make up the five per cent Government quota), they all require strengthening of their academic and support structures. There is an acute shortage of academic staff in all disciplines. The quality of existing academic staff is believed to need improvement, especially because research habits are dying out (owing to lack of research grants and unsatisfactory libraries) and many have no formal training in university teaching skills. Economic difficulties have also led to a decline in library, laboratory and recreational facilities, supply of instructional materials and teaching space.

Other problems faced by all students, but which bear particularly hard on non-Nigerians, are overcrowding in student hostels and the occasional sudden closure of universities as a result of student unrest.

Recommendations

The political will seems to be favourable to the reception of foreign students. To make it easier for Nigeria to look after them and enable them to make the most of their stay, several strategies are recommended.

One important recommendation is the establishment of Commonwealth or International Houses in four zones in the country to serve as acculturation centres and 'rooming' houses, and as the first port of call for Commonwealth and other foreign students in Nigeria. They could also serve as vacation centres and as 'refugee camps' for foreign students at any time Nigerian universities are summarily closed down. The former regional offices of the British Council could host these centres, for the purpose of easy administration and contact with universities and other agencies.

The Federal Government will need to give thought to the establishment of a fees equalisation and subsidisation fund to cushion fee fluctuations arising from foreign exchange policies of the host countries. Any students wishing to study in another Commonwealth country would then be required to pay only the amount he or she would have needed to pay in his own country (or whichever fee is lower) while the rest comes out of the fund. Perhaps ultimately a Commonwealth fund would become feasible. Fees should remain in local currency for students from African or developing Commonwealth countries but in international currency for students from developed Commonwealth countries, who could be given the opportunity to pay in instalments.

There is also need for wider information dissemination among Commonwealth countries on higher educational opportunities available in different member countries and the prospects of foreign students making use of such opportunities.

Conclusion

Our study clearly indicated that while Nigeria has taken a policy lead in declaring its readiness to accept a five per cent quota of foreign students in its annual higher education intake, the reality is far below expectation. Some strategies for improvement are the responsibility of the Federal Government and others of the universities themselves, but the whole issue is seen in a Commonwealth-wide framework.

Each Commonwealth country could follow Nigeria's lead and earmark a quota of five per cent of its total annual higher education

enrolment for foreign students, 40 per cent of which should come from other Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth's goal should be an exchange rate of 40:60 between foreign students from the developed and developing countries of the Commonwealth. In addition, member governments should be encouraged to establish both subsidy funds and bursary funds. A bursary fund could be open to competition among self-funding Commonwealth students, based on their first-year performance.

Discussion is needed on these matters among Commonwealth members at large, perhaps facilitated through the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility and Higher Education Cooperation and the ACU. Deliberate efforts will have to be made to enhance the capacity of the universities in the developing countries. These could include more mutual fee-waiver and subsidy schemes, the encouragement of a greater flow of students from industrialised to developing countries, strengthening of academic programmes in the latter and more flexible scholarship awards.

Universities are traditionally part of an international world of scholarship. Internationalism is not a reality when student exchange is not fully welcomed and supported.

Note Information was obtained by questionnaire and interview in all cases. The government, foreign and international agencies consulted were:

- Federal Ministry of External Affairs
- Federal Ministry of Education:
 - Scholarship Division
 - Bilateral Agreement, Commonwealth and African Affairs (BACAA)
- Federal Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
- The Presidency:
 - South African Relief Fund (SARF)
- National Commission for Unesco
- United States Information Service (USIS)

The universities involved in the study were:

1st generation University of Ibadan, Ibadan (UI)	Founded 1948
University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN)	1960
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (OAU)	1962
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU)	1962
University of Lagos, Lagos (UNL)	1962
University of Benin, Benin City (UNB)	1970

Border Univs: University of Calabar, Calabar (UNC), South Eastern, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri (UNM), North Eastern, Uthman Dan Fodio University (UDU) North Western

TABLE 7.1 Estimates of foreign student enrolment in nine Nigerian universities, 1985–86 to 1989–90

<i>Year</i>	<i>UI</i>	<i>UNB</i>	<i>UNN</i>	<i>UNC</i>	<i>OAU</i>	<i>UNL</i>	<i>UNM</i>	<i>UDU</i>	<i>ABU</i>	<i>Total Reported</i>
1985/ 1986	NA	NA	2	NA	NA	200	NA	28	87	317
1986/ 1987	192	NA	10	NA	14	250	46	20	141	673
1987/ 1988	174	NA	11	7	8	230	29	18	255	732
1988/ 1989	145	NA	40	13	22	240	29	46	216	751
1989/ 1990	141	65	50	53	22	250	29	3	265	678

TABLE 7.2 Foreign applicants for Commonwealth awards tenable in Nigeria, 1988 to 1991

	<i>1988</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1991</i>
Number of applicants	14	14	15	11
Number given award	8	10	8	10
Number utilised	4	7	3	4