ABSTRACT
This study is a historical analysis of the politics surrounding the drive for mass university education in Nigeria in the 1970s, exploring the dynamics and challenges of policy reconfiguration, continuities, discontinuities, and shifts. During the colonial period, the British limited access to higher education to many qualified Nigerians. Post-colonial Nigerian governments, however, attempted to realign the British higher education legacies to satisfy the country’s needs for rapid socio-economic development and national integration. This work places the pursuit of mass education at the center of Nigeria’s post-colonial higher education reform, and argues that the attempts since Nigeria’s independence to engage university education in promoting national integration was more pronounced in the 1970s. Inspired by the need to foster national unity after the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970); determined to confront the bottlenecks that impeded access to university education; and influenced by the country’s buoyant oil economy, the military regimes of the 1970s sought to spread universities facilities equitably, implement a policy of free university education, and establish a central admission body. These policies have remained crucial in understanding the challenges of higher education development in Nigeria since 1970.

INTRODUCTION
The pursuit of mass university education policies (massification) dominated Nigeria’s post-colonial higher education history. The concept of massification as used in this paper refers to a program that successive Nigerian governments embarked to expand, liberalize, and democratize access to university education. The aim was to train the country’s labor force not only to fill the vacancies created by the departing Europeans but also to help champion future economic and social development. Conceived in the 1950s, the program sought not only to remove the historical and structural bottlenecks that impeded access to university education during the colonial era but also to address the often volatile and divisive educational disparity between the Muslim North and the Christian South through equal representations of all in the existing institutions.
During the colonial period, access to university education was very limited. In fact, from 1948, when the first university, University College of Ibadan (UCI), was established, until the eve of Nigeria’s independence in 1959, the British colonial administrators consistently ignored the growing demand for more access to university education based partly on costs and maintenance of academic quality. Consequently, less than one thousand Nigerians enrolled in the college between 1948 and 1959. In keeping with the recommendations of the Ashby Commission, which was set up by the federal government in 1959 to study the country’s higher education needs, the federal government realigned the colonial higher education system to reflect Nigeria’s needs, namely acceleration of socio-economic development and national integration. No period in Nigeria’s higher education history has the federal government’s efforts to engage university education in nation building more pronounced than in the 1970s. However, no historical work has placed the pursuit of mass university education at the center of this post-colonial higher education reform nor discussed it as a policy and need-driven phenomenon. In addition, the link between mass university education and nation building in Nigeria has not been fully explored.

A number of works exist on post-colonial higher education development in Nigeria.¹ These works place the need to train local human resources for rapid economic and social development at the center of Nigeria’s post-colonial expansion of higher education as well as changes in university curriculum and admissions. They, however, underestimate how the civil war, north-south educational disparity, and oil politics coalesced to shape governments’ determination to build a strong Nigerian nation through the pursuit of mass university

education policies, particularly during the 1970s. This paper is, therefore, a historical analysis of the politics surrounding the push for mass university education under the successive military governments of Generals Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975), Murtala Mohammed (1975-1976), and Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979). It argues that the determination of these regimes to build a united nation after the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) is central to understanding mass university education policies of the 1970s. Influenced by the country’s buoyant oil economy, the military regimes of the 1970s prosecuted mass university education policies that resulted not only in the unprecedented growth of the higher education system, but also laid the foundation for the future direction of Nigeria’s higher education development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The idea of employing university education to build a united Nigerian nation underscores the mass university education policies of successive Nigerian military governments in the 1970s. A nation, as Ernest Renan noted, is a soul and a spiritual principle, constituting both the past and the present, renewing itself especially in the “present by a tangible deed: the approval, the desire, clearly expressed, to continue the communal life.”² For Renan, the “existence of a nation is an everyday plebiscite; it is, like the very existence of the individual, a perpetual affirmation of life.”³ The idea and ideal of a nation, reinforced after the civil war, formed the philosophical foundation for the post-1970 push for mass expansion of university education. The civil war clearly exposed the ethnic, ideological, and religious divisions that characterized Nigeria’s pluralistic society. It questioned the viability of the Nigerian nation, but at the same time rekindled the federal government’s determination to explore ways of uniting diverse groups together as one nation.

³ Ibid.
Given the experiences of the war, the overriding emphasis of the post-war social programs, including education, was, understandably, to keep the country together and foster national consciousness. To that end, the Head of State, General Gowon, affirmed the commitment of the federal government to foster national “reintegration, reconciliation, and reconstruction,” and requested all Nigerians to come together to “rebuild the nation anew.”

The post-war slogan such as: “no victor and no vanquished’ and “we are brothers and sisters’ underscores Gowon’s reconciliatory and unification posture. What’s more, the Nigeria’s National Pledge, written and adopted in 1976, and the Nigerian National Anthem, changed in 1978, echoed the idea of unity under one nation. While the National Pledge required Nigerians “To defend her unity and uphold her honour and glory,” the National Anthem demanded service from all Nigerians to help build “one nation bound in freedom, peace and unity.” These slogans, rooted in the experience of the war, demonstrate government’s preoccupation with the business of nation building, and as Gowon stressed, “if anything has brought all people [Nigerians] together to be one people, accepting one common destiny, it is the Nigerian Civil War.”

Gowon believed that conflict in a pluralistic society is expected, but “every nation is composed of various ethnic groups that have come together by various processes and have become unified by a common loyalty.” Gowon apparently acknowledged the absence of a collective consciousness among the diverse groups in Nigeria but wanted to create one through education for all. Thus, the promotion of national integration based on balanced educational development, dominated public policy throughout the 1970s.

GOWON, ACCESS TO EDUCATION, AND NATIONAL UNITY

5 Interview with General Yakubu Gowon by the Editor of Impact of Science on Society, Mr. Bruno Friedman, in August 1971, Impact of Science on Society, Vol. XXII, No1/2, January-June, 1972, 66.
6 Ibid.
As early as 1970, Gowon declared that forging national unity through equal access to university education would be part of his government’s post-civil war higher education policies. The educational disparity between the North and the South was a common source of fear and conflict since the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 officially fashioned Nigeria as a federation. The Federal Commissioner for Education, Chief A.Y. Eke, revealed that the educational gap between the two areas was so wide that, “roughly speaking, for every child in a primary school in the northern states there are four in the southern states; for every boy or girl in a secondary school in the North there are five in the South; and for every student in a post-secondary institution in the North there are six in the South.”

Likewise, the statistics of students enrolled in the six existing universities: University of Ibadan (UI); University of Lagos (UNILAG); University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN); Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU); University of Benin (UNIBEN), and University of Ife revealed not only a low supply of university places but imbalance in enrolment that favored southerners. Out of 14,468 students enrolled in all the universities in 1970, students from the South, constituted more than 75.6 per cent of the total population. The gross imbalance in the number of students from the South compared with those from the North should not be surprising because out of the six universities in the country, only one, ABU, was in the North. Worst still was that the inadequate facilities in the existing universities greatly restricted enrollment, as many qualified candidates failed to secure admission. For instance, out of the 7,000 applicants in the 1969/70 session, only 1,500 secured admissions.

The educational disparity between the North and the South was particularly disconcerting to the government. Since the government had expressed its determination to

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7 *West Africa*, 16 October 1978, 2027.
9 Address by his Excellency Major-General Yakubu Gowon, Head of the Federal Military Government and Visitor of the University during the 21st Anniversary of the University of Ibadan, in *Ibadan*, No. 28, July 1970, 15-16.
promote national unity, Gowon, therefore, requested the universities (who controlled admissions) to close this gap by assuming a national outlook in their admission policies, stressing that their success would be contingent on “the extent to which [they] can meet the needs and aspirations of the society which they are established to serve.”\textsuperscript{10} An attractive approach to reduce the educational gap between the North and the South without antagonizing the South was to pursue a policy of mass university education. Gowon understood this. Since the civil war disrupted educational development in Nigeria, especially in the former Eastern Region, a real explosion in numbers of qualified candidates seeking university education at the end of the war was anticipated. This reality, in the words of Gowon, “calls for expansion of existing institutions either in size or in numbers and, possibly, both.”\textsuperscript{11} Thus, he directed the universities to deliberate on the best approach to expansion, mindful of the need to supply the workforce required to facilitate economic development, as well as considering options such as the introduction of other forms of higher education, greater specialization in particular fields of study, expansion of facilities in the existing universities, and establishment of several campuses.\textsuperscript{12}

Given Nigeria's fast growing population, coupled with the increasing demand for university education, the higher educational objective of Gowon’s regime was, unquestionably, mass expansion of university education. As Gowon stated:

\begin{quote}
Of course, the size of our country, the rate of population growth, the ambition of our youths, and our national goals are also important factors that will have to be taken into consideration. I hope that Nigeria’s attitude will continue in any case to be that adequate facilities should be provided for the maximum number of students able to profit from university education.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 16.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 16-17.
The Second National Development Plan (Second NDP), launched in 1970, provides the first evidence of Gowon’s policy articulation on university expansion. The Second NDP, a five year plan (1970-1974), was designed to help transform Nigeria, among others things, into “a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.”\(^\text{14}\) Confronted with a choice to either provide university education to all Nigerians for its own sake as a means of enriching individual’s knowledge and developing his full personality, or to prepare people to undertake specific tasks and employment functions, the Second NDP declared: “Nigeria should in her (present) stage of development, regard education as both.”\(^\text{15}\) In deed, the Second NDP not only sought to restore facilities and services damaged or disrupted by the civil war, it also desired to develop and expand education at various levels in order to attain higher enrolment ratios while at the same time reducing the educational gap in the country. Mostly affected by the civil war, the UNN suffered from “severe deterioration of existing faculties, academic and public buildings, student hostels and staff houses; serious environmental degradation; and inadequate space for academic activities, recreational facilities.”\(^\text{16}\) The Second NDP thus allocated large funds for the rehabilitation, reconstruction, and expansion of its educational facilities, as well as for those of other universities.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 235. \\
\(^{16}\) University of Nigeria Nsukka at 40: 40\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Celebrations, 20-28 April 2001, 4. \\
\(^{17}\) As provided in the plan, the federal government allocated £25.500 million for the reconstruction and expansion of the UNN in addition to the £2.558 million contribution from the East-Central and South-Eastern States for the same purpose. Similarly, the Western States allocated £5.500 million for the University of Ife; the Northern States, £5.160 million for Ahmadu Bello University; and the Mid-Western State, £2.300 million for the Mid-West Institute of Technology. To guarantee steady supply of candidates for university education, the state governments planned a capital expenditure of £27.478 million on primary education while the Federal Government allocated a grant of £6.460 million for primary education. The total federal and state planned expenditure on secondary education was £28.400 million, £12.291 million on technical education and £13 195 million on teacher education. The total allocation for capital expenditure on education was £89.771 million from the states, and £138.893 million from the federal government. \textit{See, Second National Development Plan 1970-1974}, 239-42.
Notwithstanding the federal government’s pronounced determination to expand university education, northern states continued to agitate to establish their own universities and the use of quota system in university admission. Their demands further highlighted the mutual suspicion and competition that characterized regional relations since 1954. Six out of the country’s twelve states had universities. Ahmadu Bello University was located in the North Central State; the University of Nsukka in the East-Central State; the University of Lagos in the Federal Capital State of Lagos; the Universities in Ibadan and Ile-Ife in the Western State; and the University of Benin in the Mid-Western State. The six remaining states—North-Eastern State, North-Western State, Kano State, Benue/Plateau State, South-Eastern State, and Rivers State—had none. Out of the six states without universities, four were located in the North, an area marked by low university enrolment and considered ‘educationally disadvantaged.’ These states consequently embarked on plans to establish their own universities. Of course, ownership of a university was perceived as a symbol of state pride.

Given the level of inter-state and inter-ethnic rivalry, however, unregulated establishment and running of universities carried a risk of exacerbating the existing tension—a scenario captured by the *Ibadan* editorial of July 1970:

> The real danger [lies] in the creation of State institutions which will be inward-looking and inbreeding . . . . [The] isolation of the youth of each state of the Federation into their State Universities will not make for the much needed unity of the country. There exists the fearful danger that both students and their teachers will remain within their States and that a new type of “tribalism” will develop.\(^{18}\)

However the danger that indiscriminate establishment of state universities posed, the North did not relent in their pursuit. Frustrated with the low representation of their indigenes in

the existing universities, the former military governors of the northern states, under the platform of Interim Common Services Agency (ICSA), called for a change. In a letter to the Head of State, ICSA lamented that students from the North constituted less than 2 percent of the total student population in the federal universities at Ibadan and Lagos. While demanding for more state universities in the North, ICSA, in the meantime, asked the federal government to expand the preliminary courses in these universities and to give preference to students from the North in university admissions.¹⁹

Conscious of the mood in the North and worried over the negative impact of uncoordinated establishment of universities, the federal government amended the constitution, with huge implications for university development. Concerns over academic quality and financial sustainability shaped government’s decision. Gowon knew that “unless a planned and conscientious national plan for university development is introduced standards will suffer to the extent that the degrees and diplomas awarded will be worth very little.”²⁰ He understood, also, that states were in a weak position to provide sustainable financial support for new universities without federal assistance, noting that the ability of the federal government to assist was “not always taken into account in planning new universities.”²¹ Because of these concerns, the federal government suspended the constitutional provision with respect to higher education in August 1972 and transferred to the federal government “full responsibility for higher education throughout the country.”²²

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¹⁹ No. CSA/MIG/222 7 as cited in Jubril Aminu, "Educational Imbalance: Its Extent, History, Dangers and Correction in Nigeria," Isokan Yoruba Magazine, Volume III No. III (Summer 1997), 26. available at http://www.yoruba.org/Magazine/Summer97/File5.htm (accessed 21 May 2005). The (ICSA) was designed to oversee assets held in common by northern states at the time they were created from the former Northern Region in 1967. Many southerners perceived ICSA as a sign of perpetuation of the former allegedly monolithic “North.”
²⁰ Daily Times, 21 August 1972, 1.
²¹ Ibid.
²² Ibid., 17.
education ceased to be the concurrent responsibility of federal and state governments; the federal government assumed complete control.

Gowon’s decision to arrogate exclusive responsibility of university education to the federal government was not only a significant amendment of the 1963 Constitution with respect to education, but also a turning point in the government push for mass university education. The 1963 constitution had placed higher education on the Concurrent Legislative List, thus granting power to both the federal and regional governments to legislate on higher education matters, including the establishment and control of universities. It also placed primary and secondary education on the Residual List category, which meant that only the regional/state governments could legislate on them. The 1972 declaration reversed this, placing primary and secondary education on the Concurrent List and university education on the Exclusive list. By implication, the federal government, henceforth, arrogated to itself the sole right to establish universities and to legislate on all matters concerning further expansion of university education. This step paved the way for the centralization and nationalization of university expansion and admission throughout the 1970s. It also gave the federal government the power to enforce a central planning system required to promote greater national unity. As Eke puts, “instead of remaining the parochial or regional subject it had previously been, education is now a matter of immense national consequence to all the citizens of Nigeria.”

THE QUESTION OF QUOTA SYSTEM AND ADMISSION BOTTLENECKS

Even though the federal government had taken full control of university education, university education, the North still believed that their chances of closing the education gap between the North and the South were remote unless a form of quota system (affirmative

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The question of quota system did not begin in 1972. It originated in the 1950s when the North advocated a system that would promote increased enrolment of its indigenes in the University College, Ibadan (UCI). But the Inter-University Council (IUC), which was responsible for higher education policies in the British colonies, firmly opposed it. It insisted on academic merit as the sole criteria for admission to UCI. The new Nigerian federal government endorsed IUC position, and the 1962 Federal Government white paper on the Ashby Commission report reaffirmed it. Thus, throughout the 1960s, students secured admission to universities solely on academic merit. Students from the South benefited greatly because the region had embraced Western education since the 1840s without reservation. On the contrary, the North embraced Western education only selectively and reluctantly largely because of its deeply entrenched Islamic tradition. This attitude resulted in the region’s limited progress in the area of Western education. In the early 1970s, states in the North intensified their call for a quota system designed to reserve admission spots for their indigenes in the existing universities. The South had resisted the idea of a quota system because they saw it as discriminatory and anti-academic standard. The call for quota system in university admission was a clear indication that the North was dissatisfied with low enrollment of their indigenes in the existing universities.

Quota system was a divisive subject and naturally provoked a great deal of discussion and debate, thus understandably drawing the attention of the head of state. In his public address at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Gowon declared his administration’s readiness to “tackle and settle, if possible, once and for all a number of vital and controversial issues among which are the question of educational imbalance and the quota system of
admission.” Since employment opportunity in the country was few and highly competitive, the South, with higher educational and professional attainment, dominated available jobs, further widening the existing educational gap between it and the North. Gowon, nevertheless, stressed that long-term sustainable approach to overcome the educational imbalance was not through a quota system of admission into universities but instead through strengthening primary and secondary school education in the affected states so that, over time, they would produce enough candidates for university admission and job opportunities. Gowon’s assessment remains valid today as it was in 1972.

Equity was the key to national unity and Gowon recognized this. Despite his disapproval of a quota system, he admitted that a short-term solution was compelling in the interest of national unity because the “fears and anxieties of these relatively educationally backward areas are genuine and it would be irrational to dismiss those fears and anxieties as unfounded.” Continuing educational imbalance, Gowon argued, implied that northerners would continue to be “denied what they regard as an equitable share of employment opportunities in the country.” Since individual universities were responsible for admission, Gowon cautioned them to do a lot more to admit students from all parts of the country, failing which he warned: “quota system would be the only method that will provide some opportunities for the educationally backward areas.”

24 Address by his Excellency General Yakubu Gowon, on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria on Saturday, 2 December 1972, 6.
25 Ibid., 8.
26 Unfortunately, quota system was eventually introduced in 1981 to facilitate enrolment of northerners. But the implementation of the system not only threatened national unity but also failed to achieve the purpose for which it was established.
27 Ibid., 9. Gowon was from the North and he was sympathetic to the plight of the disadvantaged Northern states.
28 Ibid., 10. Gowon was referring to universities, especially universities located in the south.
In search of a framework to embark on his mass education program, the federal government convened a national seminar to organize and articulate public debate on the matter. Dubbed the Seminar on a National Policy on Education (SNPE), and chaired by Chief S.O Adebo (chair of the National Universities Commission and a former Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations), SNPE was held between 4 and 8 June 1973. The large section of the Nigerian population invited for this conference reflects, on the one hand, Gowon’s public relations campaign to win public acceptance of his regime. On the other hand, it sought to involve the end-users of university products in discussions as a means of meeting society’s needs aimed at “consummating a marriage between town and gown.” According to Adebo, the Nigerian “Governments, supported by public opinion, are anxious to reform our whole national education policy and they are seeking public reaction to their plan of reform.” Using education to promote unity was compelling, and Adebo recognized it when he further stressed that “imbalance in educational opportunities results in imbalance in economic opportunities which in turn adversely affects our national unity with the consequences that we all know. Surely, the time has come to deal firmly with this problem.” The centralization of educational institutions and democratization of education in order to correct imbalances dominated deliberations at the seminar. The report of the conference was clearly sensitive to the federal government’s mood. It recommended the expansion of university education in order to grant access to all Nigerians who could benefit from it while keeping the goal of providing free education for all in view. By recommending the

30 Participants at the SNPE included representatives of the Federal and State Ministries of Education, educational institutions, representatives of various interest groups, and organizations including the UNESCO. Observers included representatives of the British Council, Ford Foundation, USAID, and UNICEF.
32 Ibid., 42.
33 Ibid.
establishment of a national admission body, as well as equitable spread of universities, the report demonstrated its sensitivity to government’s vision.\textsuperscript{35}

The recommendations of the Seminar on a National Policy on Education highlight the two intractable obstacles to university access, namely inadequate facilities and ineffective admission system. Faced with inadequate facilities to meet increasing demand and often saddled with the intractable incidence of multiple admissions, university enrolment remained low in spite of availability of qualified applicants. For instance, between 1970 and 1975, the number of potential entrants based on passes in the Advanced Level examination witnessed sustained increase. In 1970, there were 6,739 potential entrants. That number increased to 7,886 in 1971, 10,719 in 1972, 7,660 in 1973, 13,186 in 1974, and 15,363 in 1975.\textsuperscript{36} This growth led to increased demand for university education; but the supply of admission space was insufficient.\textsuperscript{37} The primary factor that limited student admission was lack of facilities (classes and hostels) to accommodate growing demand. This made the admission process highly competitive and restrictive. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos, J.F. Ade Ajayi, aptly captured this scenario in his 1973 and 1974 matriculation addresses. Ajayi stated that “the gap between the demand for and supply of university places was widening, which makes it necessary to accord special congratulations to those who have succeeded against

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 8-10, 20-21.
\textsuperscript{37} In the 1970/71 session, out of 8,926 candidates that applied to the University of Ife, the university admitted only 1,179 applicants even though 4,311 applicants were qualified. Likewise, in the 1971/72 session, 13,740 applied, 7,066 qualified, but only 1,601 were admitted; 21,069 applied in 1972/73, 10,851 qualified, but 1,814 were admitted. In 1973/74, 23,536 applied, 11,235 qualified, but 1,645 admitted. In 1974/75, 26,741 applied, 10,729 qualified, but 2,013 admitted. In the University of Ibadan, 10,036 candidates applied for admission in 1970/71, 4,682 were qualified, but 1,383 were offered admission. In 1971/72, 13,008 applied, 4,760 were qualified, but only 1,471 were admitted. In 1972/73, 11,248 applied, 3,446 qualified, but only 1,559 were admitted. In 1973/74, 16,706 applied, 10,870 qualified, but only 2,336 were admitted. In 1974/75, 25,568 applied, 18,508 qualified, but only 3,162 were admitted. See Folayan Ojo, \textit{Nigerian Universities and High Level Manpower Development} (Lagos: Lagos University Press, 1983), 42-43.
all odds to secure admission to the university.”

He further observed that “the transition from school to University in this country is no longer smooth; it has become a stormy and capricious passage that gives would-be students and their parents far more worries than the transition from Elementary to Secondary School.”

The incidence of multiple admissions was a secondary factor that limited entry for qualified candidates. Although individual universities admitted candidates based on available facilities, there were still many unfilled spaces due to the incidence of multiple admissions. Multiple admissions occurred when students received multiple admission offers from many universities and/or departments in a university. This situation, which began in the 1960s, existed because individual universities independently operated different admission criteria, advertised separately, and conducted separate admission exams. To increase their chances of admission, many candidates understandably often applied to several universities and sometimes to multiple departments in the same universities. In most cases, top candidates often received multiple admission offers. Ultimately, such candidates would accept one admission offer. Many candidates, however, failed to inform other universities of their unwillingness to accept offers made to them. The offering universities often waited in vain hoping that such candidates would accept their offers.

As was the admission practice, when candidates reject admission offers and inform the university early enough, the university authorities would offer admissions to other equally qualified applicants who did not receive initial admission offers due to limited spaces. Candidates, though, usually failed to inform the concerned institutions or did so late and “by the time the universities are aware that their original offers would not be honored, it is too late.

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to admit those who would otherwise have accepted and utilized the places available.”

In fact, according to Adeyemi Aderinto, “it is always after matriculation that a particular university could say precisely how many students have accepted admission offers. But at that time, it is already late to start sending letters of admissions to a new set of [qualified] students because invariably lectures are at an advanced stage.” Worse still, even after matriculation, some students still left the university “if given late admission into faculties of choice. They might have accepted the first one because [they were] not sure of admission for [their] best choice.” Thus, incidences of multiple applications, multiple acceptances; uncertainty as to whether a candidate will accept admission offers; uncertainty as to whether those who accepted admission offers would actually register, worked together to deprive many qualified candidates opportunities for university admissions each year while preventing the existing universities from meeting enrolment targets.

Applicants from the South dominated incidence of multiple admissions. Since they were often the most qualified, they not only secured significant places in many universities, but also obstructed other southerners and northerners who were on the margin with regard to their qualifications for admission. An analysis of the distribution of candidates admitted into two or more universities in the 1974/75 session reveals that out of the 766 candidates offered

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40 See Address delivered at the Congregation for the conferment of degrees by the Vice-chancellor, Professor T.M. Yesufu, 26 February 1977, 6.
42 Ibid.
43 The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos, Ade Ajayi, was the first to draw attention to the incidence of multiple admissions when he highlighted the inability of the University of Lagos to meet its enrolment target. He revealed that the targets for Science, Engineering, and Environmental Design in 1976 session were 130,175 and 70 students respectively. In the science, 241 students were offered admission but 78 registered; in engineering, 130 were admitted but 54 registered; in Environmental design, 54 offered but 44 registered. The “deficit” was not peculiar to the University of Lagos; it affected all the universities in the country. Altogether, the deficit at Ibadan, Nsukka, Zaria, Ife, Lagos, and Benin was 9.8 percent in 1970-71; 11.2 percent in 1971-72; 13.8 percent in 1972-73; 11.8 percent in 1973-74; 8.0 percent in 1974-75; and 6.9 percent in 1975-76. See J.F. Ade Ajayi, Vice Chancellor’s Matriculation Address, Mimeo, University of Lagos, 13 November 1976; National Universities Commission, Report of the Academic Planning Group (Lagos: NUC, 1976), 205.
two or more admissions, (31 percent) came from the Western State, followed by the East-Central (23.12 percent), and the Mid-West (16.71 percent).\textsuperscript{44} Thus, southern candidates, who had maintained a lead in university enrolment, accounted for more than 70 percent of multiple admissions. Any meaningful explanation to this, according to Aderinto, “will have to do with intense determination of the candidates from the southern states to obtain university education. To them, a university degree was an ‘International meal ticket.’”\textsuperscript{45} Multiple admission highlighted southern domination of the education sector, as well as the public service sector, as the report of the Public Service Review indicates. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors (CVC) in 1974 unsuccessfully attempted to reform the admission system when it set up a panel of two experts to examine the problem. The panel was made up of Mr. L.R. Kay, Secretary, Universities Central Council on Admissions of the United Kingdom, and Mr. W. H. Pettipiere, Ontario Universities Applications Centre of Canada. The panel's recommendation for a central admission body to coordinate admission to all Nigerian universities, did not sit well with CVC, largely because it wanted to preserve the independence of the universities to admit their own students.\textsuperscript{46} The issue, however, did not go away and new developments in the country would soon require a revisit of the possibility of setting up a central admission body for all universities in the country.

**OIL BOOM AND UNIVERSITY EDUCATION**

In the aftermath of the SNPE Report, and as the federal government began what Gowon called ‘the widest consultations’ with various governmental and non-governmental

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\item \textsuperscript{44} Adeyemi Aderinto, 395.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Report by Mr. L.R. Kay & Mr. W. H. Pettipiere on Central Admissions Procedure in Nigerian Universities, P& D.C. Paper NO. 74/74, Com./FO/van, 31/5/75. See also Prof. B.A. Salim “Problems of Assessment and Selection into Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria,” being a paper presented by the Registrar/Chief Executive Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), Nigeria, at the 21st Annual Conference of AEAA held at Cape Town, South Africa from 25-29 August, 2003. AEAA stands for the Association for Educational Assessment in Africa.
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institutions on the major projects to execute based on the recommendations of the panel, Nigeria’s economy witnessed a sudden boom in oil revenue. This boom was occasioned by the Yom Kippur War of October 1973 in the Middle East. Nigeria had made appreciable income from oil since 1970 when it registered as a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). With the price surge generated by the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1973, oil became Nigeria’s major foreign exchange earner and the largest contributor to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).\(^47\) The war led to oil shock when Arab members of the OPEC stopped shipment of petroleum to nations that supported Israel in its conflict with Egypt—that is, the United States and its allies in Western Europe. America and European countries thereafter increased their demand for Nigerian oil. Oil prices quadrupled. Revenue from Nigerian crude oil exports increased from ₦1.4 billion in 1971 to ₦5.6 billion in 1973. Nigeria’s GDP also rose from ₦9.442 billion in 1970/71 to ₦14.410 billion in 1973.\(^48\)

Motivated by oil wealth, and after due consultation with state governments and other stakeholders, the federal government accepted the report of the SNPE in 1974, reconstituted the National University Commission (NUC), and launched the Third National Development Plan (Third NDP). The report of the SNPE, which emphasized mass university education, constituted the main thrust of the regime’s national education policy. To consolidate control of universities in order to ensure a representative expansion of universities, Gowon immediately extended the powers of the NUC to include, among other things, advising the federal government on the creation of new universities and receiving block grants for allocation to universities.\(^49\) The NUC, as previously constituted, was unable to perform these roles because higher education was a joint responsibility of both state and federal governments.

\(^{47}\) The war was fought between Israel on one side, and Egypt and Syria on the other side, backed by Iraq and Jordan, and supported economically by Saudi Arabia.  
Since the federal government had taken over the responsibility for higher education, the reconstituted NUC became an instrument in executing the federal government’s vision of a centrally coordinated university system in order to realize the goals of massification and national unity.⁵⁰

Swayed by the enormous financial resources from oil revenue and dedicated to its promise of university education for all, the Third NDP placed the expansion of higher education at the center of realizing national development and unity. The Third NDP, launched in 1975, outlined ambitious projects to pursue. While the First and Second NDP allocated a capital expenditure of ₦2.2 billion and ₦3.0 billion respectively, the Third NDP earmarked an expenditure of ₦30 billion.⁵¹ In deed, the Third NDP outlined grand plans to expand agriculture, industry, transport, housing, water supplies, health facilities, education, rural electrification, community development, and state programs. The expansion of the productive base of the economy simultaneously required the production of skilled labor to staff the expanding economy, placing university education at the center of accomplishing governments’ objectives. The objectives of the university educational program for the Third NDP period were “to expand facilities for education aimed at equalizing individual access to education throughout the country…to consolidate and develop the nation’s system of education in response to the economy’s manpower needs [and] …to make an impact in the area of technological education.”⁵² In pursuit of these objectives, the Third NDP announced its resolve to expand facilities in the existing universities, establish four new universities, and increases student enrolment from 23,000 in 1975 to 53,000 by 1980. To that end, it allocated

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⁵⁰ University authorities, hitherto accustomed to having direct contact with the federal government, now had to pass through the NUC. This change generated bitter controversy that has endured until the present. A further study is needed to account for how the power tussles between the NUC officials and universities authorities affected the smooth expansion of universities.


⁵² Ibid., 245.
a total capital expenditure of ₦251.856 million. Furthermore, contrary to the notion that low enrolment in universities was due to lack of sufficiently qualified students, the Third NDP blamed the universities: “the university system has over the years adhered too rigidly to restrictive admission policies which in the light of current realities are over due for a drastic revision.”

To break down the “built-in barrier against expanded student intake, the plan promised to set up a ‘high powered committee . . . to look into various facets of the problem and make recommendations to the federal government for adoption in the universities.”

Influenced by the sudden wealth, the federal government went ahead to establish seven universities, instead of four as provided in the Third NDP. The new universities were deliberately sited in the so-called disadvantaged states, mostly in the North, to assuage them. The establishment of the seven universities was largely political. The need for political and regional balance, intended to promote national unity, rather than the demographic presence of students seeking admission, weighed heavily in the decision. With thirteen universities under federal control, financial allocations from the federal government increased, enrolment surged, and the polity quieted. The total budget for universities, put at ₦39 million in 1970/71, increased to ₦320 million in 1976. Likewise, student enrolment increased from 14,468 in the 1970/71 session to 40,552 in 1976. This period, as Alex Gboyega and Yinka Atoyebi noted, “marked the decisive turning point when university education became available to the masses in Nigeria.” Nigeria’s buoyant economy strengthened the government’s capability to execute far-reaching plans and provided the motivation for massive increases in government public expenditures to expand infrastructure and social

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53 Ibid., 245.
54 Ibid., 249
services. Likewise, since the oil wealth coincided with domestic pressure for university expansion, the federal government seized the moment to engage in unprecedented expansion of access designed not only to provide a workforce to manage the expanding economy, but also to assuage regional, state, and ethnic demands through the democratization of university locations. As JF Ade Ajayi, Lameck KH Goma, G. Ampah Johnson observed, "It was the oil revenues that incited the federal government to create not only a national system of higher education, but also education as a whole, under the federal control as a factor of reconciliation and unification after the civil war."\(^{57}\)

Not only was Gowon committed to expanding university facilities, he was also eager to reform university admission system in pursuit of his goal of mass education. Thus, in keeping with the objectives of the Third NDP, Gowon stated that expansion of university facilities “will have to be accompanied by a realistic reappraisal of entry qualifications into our Universities so as to render these increased opportunities for university education accessible to a greater number of aspiring Nigerians.”\(^{58}\) He requested NUC to make recommendations on a review of entry requirements. Political and social tension, however, marred Gowon’s administration despite his mass education programs. Massive allegations of corruption against the regime and Gowon’s indefinite postponement of plans to hand over the government to a civilian regime in 1976 caused dissatisfaction and unrest in Nigeria. By the spring of 1975, there was a general sense of foreboding in the air that the military government had lost its bearing and would need to go. The regime was doomed.

THE ROAD TO CENTRALIZED ADMISSION


\(^{58}\) Speech delivered by Gowon at the Inauguration of the national Universities Commission, 10 July 1975.
On 29 July 1975, a group of senior army officers, led by Colonel Murtala Mohammed overthrew the Gowon’s regime. Like the previous government, the new military regime declared its commitment to nation building. According to Murtala, “In the endeavor to build a strong, united and virile nation, Nigerians have shed much blood,’ but unfortunately, the ‘leadership [he refers to Gowon] either by design or default, had become too insensitive to the true feelings and yearnings of the people.”\textsuperscript{59} To satisfy the yearnings of Nigerians, Murtala immediately announced 1979 as the deadline to hand over control to a civilian government. In addition, following the recommendation of the Justice Ayo Irikefe’s panel, set up by his administration in 1975 to advise it on the creation of more states, Murtala announced the creation seven additional states in February 1976, bringing the total number of states to nineteen.\textsuperscript{60}

With the creation of more states, demands for universities increased. In a way, the politics of state creation was analogous to that of universities. Nigerians often demanded for states in order to maximize the opportunity to partake in the share of the federal wealth. One way to guarantee this was for states to train their own high-level workforce at the university level. Since universities existed in twelve out of the nineteen states, the seven remaining states began to demand their own universities, and as Inter University Council aptly observed, “The cohesion of the Nigerian State depends on Lagos listening to these voices.”\textsuperscript{61}

The establishment of more universities did not resolve the problem of multiple admissions and the Murtala regime had to confront it. Candidates from the North, mostly affected by this problem, continued to record low enrolment in universities. For instance,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Murtala Mohammed, Televised broadcast in the evening of 30 July 1975. He noted that with the intervention of his regime Nigeria would have another opportunity of rebuilding the nation.
  \item \textsuperscript{60} The states Murtala created in 1967 were as follows: Benue, Kaduna, Borno, Sokoto, Plateau, Kano, Kwara, Oyo, Lagos, Bendel, Cross River, Rivers, Anambra, Imo, Gongola, Niger, Bauchi, Ondo, Ogun.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Inter-University Council, “Visit to New Nigerian Universities by D.P. Saville,” report no 13 of 1977, December 1977, para. 1.4 (Inter-University Council files, mimeographed).
\end{itemize}
during the 1974-1975 academic year, the six northern states (out of the twelve states in the federation) with more than 50 percent of the total population, accounted for only 5,764 or just under 22 percent of the national total university enrolment of 26,448. This unequal access to university education made the northerners uncomfortable because university education was perceived to confer greater benefits on the recipients and greater access to national resources or ‘the national cake' by Nigerian ethnic groups. According to T.M. Yesufu, “A federal or confederal country, in which some sections feel inferior and dominated because of educational imbalances, tends to be inherently unstable. Equal educational opportunity tends to ensure equal employment opportunities.”

To address the problem of multiple admissions, the new regime moved quickly by setting up the Committee on University Entrance (CUE) in December 1975. Headed by M.S. Angulu, the committee was asked to study the problems of admission into Universities in Nigeria with a view to removing all bottlenecks limiting entry into these institutions so that the increased opportunities for university education in all parts of the country are enhanced. In addition, the CUE was asked to review the entry requirements of the various Universities in Nigeria with a view to making them not only realistic and responsive to national needs and aspirations but also uniform in the whole university system, if necessary through a Common Entrance Board. The terms of reference of the CUE reflected the urgency and seriousness of the problem. Besides, it highlighted the federal government’s willingness to liberalize admissions for the sake of regional equality and mass access.

Even though Murtala’s regime suddenly ended on 13 February 1976 when Lt. Col. B.S. Dimka assassinated the Head of State in an abortive coup, the federal government

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64 Mr. M. S. Angulu was the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture & Natural Resources, Minna.
65 *Report of the National Committee on University Entrance*, Lagos, February 1977, ii-iii.
agenda to reform the admission system remained intact under the leadership of General Olusegun Obasanjo. Uncertain about the step the new head of state, a southerner, would take to close the educational gap between the North and South, northern states increased their pressure on the federal government to intervene in the university admission process. One of the most ardent lobbyists was Dr. Jubril Aminu, then the Executive Secretary of the National Universities Commission and a member of the CUE. Aminu used his influential position to agitate vigorously for equal representation of all ethnic groups in the existing universities. In a 53-page influential paper he addressed to the federal government, Aminu lamented:

The four old states of East Central, Lagos, Midwest and West exercise an alarming monopoly of enrolment into the University system. These four states, with a combined population of about one third of the whole country, have for long had a disproportionate advantage in higher education. Even recently, in the 6 old Universities the four states had 75.6 per cent, 71.4 per cent, 72.9 percent, 68.3 per cent and 69.4 per cent of the enrolments in the academic years 1970/71, 72/72, 72/73, 73/74, 74/75, respectively.66

Based on Aminu disclosure, it was apparent that unless the trend was reversed, the future of Nigeria rested in the hands of southern states since, according to him, “they have enjoyed a long monopoly of highly skilled manpower development in all disciplines.”67 It is important to point out that the reason why the South maintained a wide lead in educational development was due to their more positive reception to the early efforts of the Christian Missionaries who brought Western Education along with their Christian faith to the region.

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66 Jubril Aminu, “Educational Imbalance: Its Extent, History, Dangers and Correction in Nigeria,” 3. Aminu was refereeing to the four states out of the twelve created by Gowon in 1967. Murtala Mohammed created more in 1975 and the former East Central State became Anambra and Imo; former Western State became Oyo, Ondo and Ogun; former Mid-West became Bendel, and Lagos State was retained. These seven new states are located in the South. Out of the remaining twelve states described as disadvantaged, ten (Benue, Kaduna, Borno, Sokoto, Plateau, Kano, Kwara, Gongola, Niger, and Bauchi) are located in the north and two (Cross-River and Rivers) are located in the South.

67 Ibid., 3.
The North, on the other hand, resisted Christian missionaries and Western education, rightly perceiving the proselytizing activities of the missionaries as major threats to their Islamic religion. Because the northerners were handicapped from the onset, Aminu suggested a sort of quota system for them. Even though Gowon had established all the seven new universities in the educationally disadvantaged states, Aminu, however, noted that “this action by itself would never solve the problem of imbalance without concomitant changes in the admission policies.”68 According to him, the criteria for university admission “must only be uniformly applied if they are fair and just from first principles; namely, if all started the competition from the same line.”69 Aminu was clearly playing ethnic politics, as southern dominance of the country’s workforce was increasingly making northerners uncomfortable. Aminu’s argument in favor of quote system was misplaced. It did not have the chance of closing the educational imbalance between the North and the South without a concerted effort by the North to produce enough high school students who would be willing and qualified to pursue university education. That Aminu failed to pay serious attention to the primary and secondary school education levels that ultimately feed the universities reveals the thoughtlessness that shaped public policy in Nigeria since independence.

Largely influenced by Aminu’s memo, President Obasanjo convened a special meeting with the Committee of Vice Chancellors and officials of the NUC on 18 September 1976 to discuss the issues Aminu raise: admission problem affecting candidates from the educationally disadvantaged areas of the country.70 Obasanjo bluntly blamed the heads of Nigerian universities for maintaining an aristocratic seclusion and remoteness from the society they were meant to serve, a fact he considered “a big constraint in the expansion

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68 Ibid., 12.
69 Ibid., 9.
70 Minutes of Special Meeting of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors with the Head of State at Dodan Barracks on Saturday, 18 September 1976, 1.
programme of all our universities.” He cautioned that since the federal government had committed large sums of money to the universities, it expected them to “reflect the true Nigerian character both in their intake, the content of the courses offered, and their physical environment.” As he further cautioned:

The universities should be a vehicle for the promotion of national consciousness, unity, understanding, and peace. Education is a recognized factor of unity in a nation, but unfortunately we still have within our nation educational disparity which tend[s] to undermine the desires and efforts to achieve true unity; because there can only be true unity where educational opportunities and resultant facilities, amenities, and benefits are evenly distributed.

It was apparent at the meeting that the federal government had made up its mind to establish a central admission body with the ultimate aim of introducing a quota system in university admission. At the meeting, the federal government informed university administrators of its readiness to establish a central admission body to regulate university admission, eradicate multiple admissions and ensure equity in regional enrolment. The goal, as Col. Ahmadu Ali, the federal commissioner for education stressed, was to help usher “a more pragmatic formula for admission into [Nigerian] universities that will reflect the federal nature of this country and that will redress the chronic imbalance without necessarily reducing standards.” Apparently, the commissioner was diplomatic in his appraisal of the situation. It was unlikely for the government to evolve a ‘more pragmatic formula’ to admit students without fundamentally changing the prevailing admission system based on merit, a system that favored candidates from the South. It was also clear that the federal government wanted to introduce a quota system of admission, which would reduce the number of admitted candidates from the South, in order to enhance the chances of northerners. But as long as

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71 Ibid., 3.
72 Ibid, Annexure ‘A’ 2.
73 Ibid., 2-3.
74 Ibid., Annexure ‘B’2.
universities controlled admission, it was difficult for the government to impose a quota system. This is because southerners, who had continued to resist quota system because they believed it would lower academic standards, dominated the administration of Nigerian universities, and would probably sabotage the implementation of a quota system. Aminu recognized this factor when he stated that the senates of Nigerian university—responsible for admission—are very conservative bodies that jealously guard what they call university autonomy and academic freedom but added that “neither of these can over-ride national unity and harmony.” 75 Conscious of this debate, the federal government tactically decided to set up a central examination body as a prelude to the eventual imposition of quota system. Under this arrangement, the power of universities to admit students would be regulated by a central body that would implement government policies.

In establishing a central admission body, the federal government gave a misleading impression that university aspirants and students from the South were responsible for the incidence of multiple admissions and low enrollment. What the candidates did was to err on the side of multiple admissions by applying to several universities with the hope that at least one or more will turn out favorably. Having conducted admission for decades, it is surprising that universities did not come up with a system of preventing, or at least, minimizing incidence of multiple admissions. A system of projecting what annual percentage of candidates to enroll or decline admission offers would have easily provided universities with statistical basis to increase student enrollment beyond their optimal capacity, thus making rooms for declined admissions or dropouts. By ignoring this option, the federal government showed that political consideration instead of sustainable expansion of university education shaped its policy. Using the incidence of multiple admissions to justify the establishment of a

central admission system was a weak argument—though a good excuse. Blaming the admission disadvantages of the North on discrimination from southern universities, their VCs, and their so-called elite meritocracy—while ignoring its colonial roots for which the South cannot be held responsible—was an ingenious argument by Aminu. Indeed, fewer candidates from the North were qualified for university admission and the quota system was not a real solution. As Gowon declared in 1972, the real long-term solution would be a push to increase enrolments in primary and secondary education in the North. By ignoring this and thus failing to call for greater investment in primary and secondary education, Aminu demonstrated that the North was simply looking for a short cut and less sustainable solution to the problems.

A far-reaching step in the quest for mass expansion occurred in 1976 when announced the decision of the Supreme Military Council to make university education, including technical secondary school and post-secondary school, tuition-free and boarding-free; students’ feeding was also subsidized by 50 percent. Obasanjo had launched the Universal Primary Education Scheme (UPE) on 2 September 1976, which made primary education free and compulsory in the country. Extending free education to the post-primary and post-secondary education was unprecedented. With the increase in the number of universities as well as free tuition, Obasanjo believed that “more Nigerians will continue to have the benefit of higher education until a stage was reached where no section of this country would find itself on the defensive in the quest for and attainment of knowledge.” In addition, to reduce the bottlenecks that impeded access to the universities, and based on the recommendation of the Committee on University Entrance, Obasanjo also announced the

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76 Address by his Excellency General Yakubu Gowon, on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria on Saturday, 2 December 1972, 8.
77 “Our Educational Legacy,” Olusegun Obasanjo’s Speech on the convocation ceremony of the University of Ibadan on 17 November 1976, 13.
establishment of the University Central Admission Board—later called the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB)—which came into effect from 1977/78 session “to harmonize and standardize admission process into our universities.”

Obasanjo’s decision to introduce free tuition, free boarding, subsidized feeding, and establish a University Central Admission Board was the height of massification and a major turning point in the development of higher education in Nigeria. Beside seeking to eliminate the incidence of multiple admissions that had hitherto led to the underutilization of university spaces, the government’s free education policy intensified demand for university education from those who previously were prevented due to financial constraints. However, the capacity of the government to meet its financial obligations to the universities suffered when the country relapsed into a recession in the late 1970s.

**ECONOMIC RECESSION, JAMB, AND NATIONAL UNITY**

Nigerian economy suffered a recession in the later months of 1977, occasioned by a drastic decline in oil revenue. Since oil revenue accounted for over 93 percent of Nigeria’s revenue and over 95 percent of its foreign exchange, the decline led to a fall in the country’s GDP by 5.7 per cent. Because of this new reality, the federal government modified some of its one-year-old liberalization policy. In his budget speech, Obasanjo noted that “...although petroleum remained the greatest contributor to the economy, its share in the national income declined slightly. [He insisted that] …the 1977/78 budget had to be a strict one both in terms of government having to cut down its programmes and also in terms of sacrifices which were being demanded from all Nigerians.” Realizing the ambitious hopes and aspirations articulated by the seminar on the National Policy on Education thus became a big challenge.

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78 Ibid., 12
As C.O. Taiwo puts it, the NPE “was conceived during a period of buoyant economy but born in (a) period of tight economy which made it difficult to realize the hopes and fulfill the promises expeditiously, if at all.”\(^{81}\)

The oil boom of 1973-74 and the need to retain public support, in fact, fueled university expansion policies. It inspired the government to abolish tuition fees, reduce boarding and lodging charges in 1977, thus leading to sharp increases in student enrolment from 40,552 in 1976 to 47,499 in 1977, and increases in government’s financial commitments to the universities. Government’s massive financial allocation to universities, however, led to a huge drop in local revenue in fees generated by the universities from ₦10.4 million to ₦4.7 million.\(^{82}\) The 1977 oil decline, therefore, compelled the federal government to reduce its financial commitment to the universities and introduced austerity measures in the country. The shortfall in NUC recommendations and actual grants to universities in 1977/78 session were over ₦24 million.\(^{83}\) As NUC noted, the result was that “physical facilities cannot be developed at a sufficiently rapid rate to meet the demands for university places . . . . Congestion and squalor are worsening, and social problems are bound to accompany congestion.”\(^{84}\)

Though the federal government borrowed Nigeria’s first jumbo loan of US$1 billion from the international capital market in 1977, the impact of the government’s belt-tightening measures on financing social services, including the universities, was immediate; government reintroduced some fees in Nigerian universities.\(^{85}\) It revised hostel accommodation charges


\(^{83}\) Ibid.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 26.

upwards at ₦90.00 per session of thirty-six weeks or ₦30.00 in a session of three terms, and
the feeding fees upwards from 50 Kobo per day to ₦1.50 per student per day (for three meals). The federal government introduced these fees in order to ease its financial burden in funding university education, but these fees were not really the answer because it did not address the root of universities’ financial problems. *Daily Times* editorial stated that the reason why policy maker failed to “address themselves to the more important question of how to offer university education to a maximum number of students was the lack of long term strategic planning.” It further cautioned that instead of assuming the responsibility of student housing and accommodation, which saddled the government and university authorities with avoidable non-academic problems, they “ought to put some bite into their off-campus policy, so that they become non-residential in the shortest time possible.”

Aggravated by the poor living and working conditions of university students and staff, due to the government’s austerity measures, Nigerian universities emerged “as centers of vigorous protest and often violent confrontation against the authorities.” The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) led the way when it embarked on a massive protest in May 1978. In response, the federal government immediately closed down all the universities, banned NUNS and expelled its president, Segun Okeowo, together with other student leaders. Confronted with complaints by the university authorities, the federal government accused them of financial mismanagement and recklessness. The Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT), a hitherto conservative association, metamorphosed into a formidable opposition group known as Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 1978.

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88 Ibid.
The ASUU assumed a leadership position in the struggle against the harsh policies of the Obasanjo regime and those of successive military and civilian regimes.\(^{91}\)

While the liberalization policy of the federal government seemed to suffer a setback, its attempt to democratize access to university admission faced similar fate. From the inception of JAMB to the release of its first examination results, the body continued to attract stiff opposition, especially from southerners who were suspicious of its agenda. JAMB’s first result for the 1978/79 session disappointed the educationally disadvantaged states who had expected significant jump in their enrollment figures. Of the 113,162 candidates who applied for admission in the 1978/79 session, less than 20,000 candidates came from the ten states of the North.\(^{92}\) Out of this number, only 14,417 students, representing only 12 percent of the total number, were admitted. In spite of the population of the North, the number of candidates who sought admissions into the universities from the northern states was small when compared with the total number of applications received. While only 2,776 students from the former North gained admission, 11,641 students from the South gained admission.\(^{93}\) The affected states blamed the board for admitting fewer students from their region.

The expectation that a central admission body would either expand admission or resolve the problem of lopsided admission was too naïve and unrealistic. First, there was no significant effort on the part of states in the North to increase their investment in high school education in order to produce enough qualified candidates for university education. Secondly, there was little or no attempt by the federal government to expand facilities in the existing

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\(^{93}\) Joint Admission and matriculation Board, Lagos as reproduced in Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities, “Higher Education and Development in the Context of the Nigerian Constitution,” The Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Seminar held at the University of Benin, Benin City, 26-27 February 1982, 68.
university in order to increase their absorptive capacity. Thirdly, due to logistical problems, JAMB exams were conducted in chaotic and questionable circumstances with the result that candidates missed their exams or exam centers were cancelled due to malpractices.

Out of their dissatisfaction with JAMB, northern students enrolled in universities in the North embarked on violent demonstrations demanding the abolition of the board. In response, the federal government closed all the universities in the North. As reported by *West Africa*, the JAMB debate divided Nigerian students on ethnic lines, with southerners favoring JAMB and northerners determined to wipe it out. According to the paper, southern newspapers soon attacked “the demonstrating students, and [supported] the principle that university admissions be based only on exam-proven academic achievement (which they still dub “merit”)—a principle that will obviously favor the better resourced south.”

Widespread unrest in Nigerian universities continued until the end of Obasanjo handed over power to an elected government under Shehu Shagari in 1979. A new constitution that reflected the federal character of Nigeria emerged. This constitution had implication future development of higher education. By removing legislation on higher education from the exclusive legislative list and placing it on the concurrent list, both the federal government and the nineteen states acquired equal powers to provide higher education. The federal government’s monopoly on university education since 1972 ended. This change was part of a general constitutional revisions, which took into account the failure or problems created by the previous and successive military regimes’ efforts to centralize the control of higher education. It was also motivated by the need to re-assert federalist principles in the country.

CONCLUSION.

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94 *West Africa*, 9 April 1979, 626.
Educational gap between the largely Muslim North and Christian South produced frequent regional tension in Nigeria since the colonial period. Conscious of its educational disadvantage, the North understandably resisted potential southern domination, a relationship that was “haunted by fear and suspicion.”95 It was not surprising that the bitter experience of the Nigerian Civil War compelled the military administration of Gowon, Mohammed, and Obasanjo to forge a strong, united nation by investing in mass education policies. The higher education policies of this period set the tone for the post-1979 direction of higher educational; and, they are, more importantly, crucial in understanding the challenges of mass university education and nation building in Nigeria.

For instance, JAMB, established in 1978 to coordinate university admissions for mass, equitable access, failed to guarantee greater access for northerners. Although the number of universities grew from six in 1970 to thirteen in 1979 and enrolment surged from 14,468 in the 1970/71 session to 57,742 in the 1979/80 session, students from the North remained grossly under-represented in universities.96 Part of the reason is that while southern states invested in providing greater access to primary and secondary education for their indigenes, the North waited for initiatives to come from the federal government. Such initiative came in 1981 when President Shagari, a northerner, used JAMB to implement the controversial quota system, a system that compromised national unity. Intended to help increase access to the academically disadvantaged northerners, quota system alienated southerners who lost admission slots in the federal universities. Determined to guarantee university education for their indigenes, and encouraged by the 1979 constitutional amendment that transferred education to the concurrent legislative list, governors in the South made the establishment of

95 Robin Hallett, “Unity, Double-Think and the University,” Ibadan, No. 6 (1959), 4.
state-owned universities a high order political business, even under severe resource constraints. Eight universities emerged in the South between 1979 and 1983. The South continued to maintain educational lead while the goal of closing the educational gap between the North and the South through JAMB and quota failed woefully. In fact, JAMB and quota system have remained to this day a lightning rod for intense, divisive debates on nation building, often threatening the corporate existence of Nigeria.

What’s more, the financial burden of maintaining an enlarged university system created in the 1970s posed serious challenges to future government. Shagari realized how public support for Obasanjo regime waned in 1978 when he re-introduced payment of university fees and therefore made a reckless but politically safe decision to make free education a national education policy, a policy that was apparently unsustainable. Emphasis on proliferation of universities instead of expanding facilities in the existing universities did not produce significant increases in enrollment. Notwithstanding the rapid increase in enrollment in the 1970s, less than 12 percent of candidates secured admissions. Widespread corruption and sharp practices, often with the cooperation of university management and government officials, dominated the disbursement and utilization of funds. Besides, huge financial allocations to university expansion in the 1970s from the federal government—which continued in the early 1980s—led to reckless, bogus design and conceptualization of building projects at various universities. Many of these projects were abandoned when the country suffered severe economic recession from 1983 to 1993.

By dominating the provision of university education and resisting private sector involvement, the regimes of the 1970s shifted heavy financial burden of managing universities to future administrations. Faced with economic collapse, funding of existing institutions strained the country’s lean finances. That there was need for adjustment could no
longer be either denied or resisted. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Buhari and Babangida regimes (1983-1993) embarked on rationalization and austerity measures that severely affected academic and infrastructural development of universities. Universities, mostly, have not fully recovered.