

# Exploration of Vice Chancellors' Perceptions on Institutional Barriers to Undergraduate Access in Nigeria's Private Universities: A mixed Methods Case Study

<sup>1</sup>Joyce Akinluyi Ogunyemi (Ed.D.) || <sup>2</sup>Beverly Barksdale (Ed.D.)

## Abstract

<sup>1&2</sup>College of Arts, Sciences, and Professional Studies,  
Gwynedd Mercy University,  
Pennsylvania, USA.

### Correspondence:

Dr. Joyce A. Ogunyemi  
Gwynedd Mercy University,  
Pennsylvania, USA.  
[Ogunyemi.j@gmercyu.edu](mailto:Ogunyemi.j@gmercyu.edu)

*This mixed methods case study explored vice chancellors' perceptions on institutional barriers to undergraduate access in Nigeria's private universities. Three research questions were developed through a reflexive approach, guided by the framework. Using purposive sampling, 6 vice chancellors out of 29 were selected from across the six geopolitical zones, representing a 21% response rate. The study employed a convergent parallel research design, conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews for qualitative data, which was thematically analysed. Quantitative measures extracted archival secondary data from policy documents produced by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) between 2015 and 2023 on annual key figures, including candidates' applications, the number of candidates examined, enrolment figures across all universities, and quota allocations. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to identify trends and disparities in enrolment, particularly in private universities. Analyses of findings and results suggest that institutional barriers are significant obstacles created by regulatory institutions and internal university policies, collectively limiting the accessibility and attractiveness of private universities in Nigeria. The centralised system of JAMB continues to create challenges for students, universities, and the broader educational landscape, ultimately contributing to low enrolment in private universities. Significant annual disparities also exist between registered candidates for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examinations (UTME), examination takers, and enrollees in private universities. The government's comprehensive policy approach continues to restrict universities' autonomy, limiting their ability to adapt curricula to local needs. The study made recommendations for policy and practice, based on the findings.*

Key Words: Undergraduate Access || Private Universities || Institutional Barriers || Higher Education Access || Vice Chancellors' Perceptions on Institutional Barriers || Nigeria

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## Introduction

Institutional barriers have been identified as significant factors hindering undergraduate access to Nigeria's private universities across the six geopolitical zones. This persists despite the growing need for a highly skilled labor force focused on the local market (Olawore & Ajayi, 2016). Each year, a large number of applicants sit for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), organised by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). However, fewer than one in five applicants typically secure admission to universities (Moti, 2012). One such barrier is the recently introduced Computer-Based Test (CBT), with which many candidates are unfamiliar. JAMB set the CBT as a prerequisite examination for admission into both public and private Nigerian universities. The admission process is based on a system of catchment areas and quotas: 45% merit, 35% catchment/locality/area, and 20% allocated to educationally less developed states. This quota system is particularly applied in the northern region (Akuta, 2009).

This convergent parallel mixed-methods case study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the under-researched area of undergraduate access in Nigeria's private universities. It explores the perceptions of private university vice chancellors (VCs) regarding institutional barriers to undergraduate access across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones and offers insights into how these barriers can be overcome to expand access. This research collected and analysed data on the perceptions of six vice chancellors regarding institutional barriers to undergraduate access in Nigeria's private universities across the six geopolitical zones. The study incorporates the perceptions of private university vice chancellors into the body of work where their voices have largely been absent.

Statista (2023) reported that there were 1.8 million full-time undergraduate university students in Nigeria in 2019, with the majority, approximately 1.2 million, enrolled in public universities. However, enrollment in private universities (PUs) was much lower, standing at only about 103,000. Furthermore, Wilkins (2015) highlighted rising inequality as a major global issue, particularly prevalent in Africa. Numerous empirical studies indicate that persistent inequality is driven by factors such as ethnic fractionalisation, politically related variables like government size, education, returns to education, and price discrimination (Milanovic, 2003; Shimeles & Nabassaga, 2018).

Institutional barriers to the diffusion of the mission of private universities have been ignored (Krücken, 2003). As such, an awareness of definitions and theories of institutional barriers that relate to higher education provides a basis for understanding how to broaden undergraduate access in private universities. In some contexts, institutional barriers are defined as the hindrance in the institutional environment that prevents market selection forces to function (Chang & Wu, 2014). In education, institutional barriers are administrative guidelines, rules, and policies institutions follow that prevent access or make access difficult in institutions (Bell, 2012 in Shelton, 2021). Institutional challenges may exist at the local, regional, or national/government level and may include policy challenges such as carrying capacity or absorption rate in private universities, admissions criteria, and restrictions on number of students on certain programs. The functionalities of these as gatekeepers of undergraduate access in private universities is also examined here.

Institutional barrier is a complex phenomenon with multiple perspectives and philosophies being continuously debated by researchers. In higher education, it is about how institutional policies and structures shape access. A failure to address these challenges and barriers has negative implications for undergraduate access (Wilson-Strydom, 2015), observing that "*Issues of social justice in higher education together with a focus on access or widening participation have become of increasing importance globally*" (pp 143–155). The growth and expansion of higher education systems in sub-Saharan Africa have been marked over the last four decades by four features; increase in the number of public universities through the conferment of university status to middle level higher education institutions, rapid establishment of private universities, a broader spatial distribution of both public and private universities even though skewed towards economically endowed regions, and the gradual emergence of institutional and academic program stratification (Lebeau & Oanda, 2020). These developments have had multiple implications for access to higher education and inequalities.

Research seeks to add to the knowledge base of how Vice Chancellors perceive institutional barriers and lends voice to the perceptions of Vice Chancellors on institutional barriers in PUs where their voices have been largely absent. It proposes the interventions that can be mounted to remove or surmount these to increase undergraduate access. It also sought to contribute to literature related to higher education access by exploring institutional barriers to undergraduate access in Nigeria's private universities. Research in this area may enable policymakers and management in private universities to understand ways that Vice Chancellors perceive institutional barriers to undergraduate access and the contributory factors. The results of the study could help policy makers and management to identify strategies to broaden access in private universities.

## **Methods**

This convergent parallel mixed methods case study used qualitative method to examine the perceptions of six Vice Chancellors of private universities in Nigeria on institutional barriers to undergraduate access in Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Quantitative approach used archival secondary data produced by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) between 2015-2023. This convergent parallel mixed-methods case study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the under-researched area of undergraduate access in Nigeria's private universities. The design was deemed appropriate to gain a deeper understanding of each Vice Chancellors' self-perceived understanding of institutional barriers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gutterman & Fetters, 2018; Jackson-Gordon & Plano Clark, 2024) and to use quantitative approach to explore and validate the qualitative findings. Additionally, the study followed the approach of exploring "an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96).

### **Research Questions**

- What are Vice Chancellors' perceptions of undergraduate student access to Nigeria's private universities?
- What institutional barriers affect undergraduate access in private universities across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones?
- What are the policy implications of student access in Nigeria's private universities?

### **Sampling**

Purposive sampling technique gathers data with certain considerations such as considering authorities that will best answer the research questions. This technique is a non-probability sampling technique to draw samples, also known as judgemental, selective or subjective sampling, where the choice of cases and institutions that are investigated is based purely on the researcher's judgement, with bias being inevitable in this selection process (Mertler, 2021; Sugiyono, 2021). This research used an interview guide to collect qualitative data and used the method to investigate, explore, and uncover perspectives of stakeholders, and to understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problems (Creswell, 2014). It included Vice Chancellors of all ethnic backgrounds, across different disciplines, with experience, age, and gender. The data analysis from both the qualitative and quantitative of the study was integrated and methodologically triangulated to provide a full description of the findings. Methodological triangulation involves using different methods to approach the same research question and to cross-verify results to reduce the risk of bias that might occur if only one single method research technique were used (Denzin et al., 2023). As such, two methods of analysis were used in the analysis of data for this research: thematic and descriptive analysis.

## **Results**

Results of the study firstly identified that Vice Chancellors of private universities in Nigeria acknowledge that institutional barriers are significant obstacles and factors that prevent and collectively limiting the accessibility and attractiveness of private institutions. Secondly, perceived reasons for institutional barriers to undergraduate access in Nigeria's private universities are diverse and complex, ranging from low quota limits/allocation, admission requirements, finance, limited infrastructural

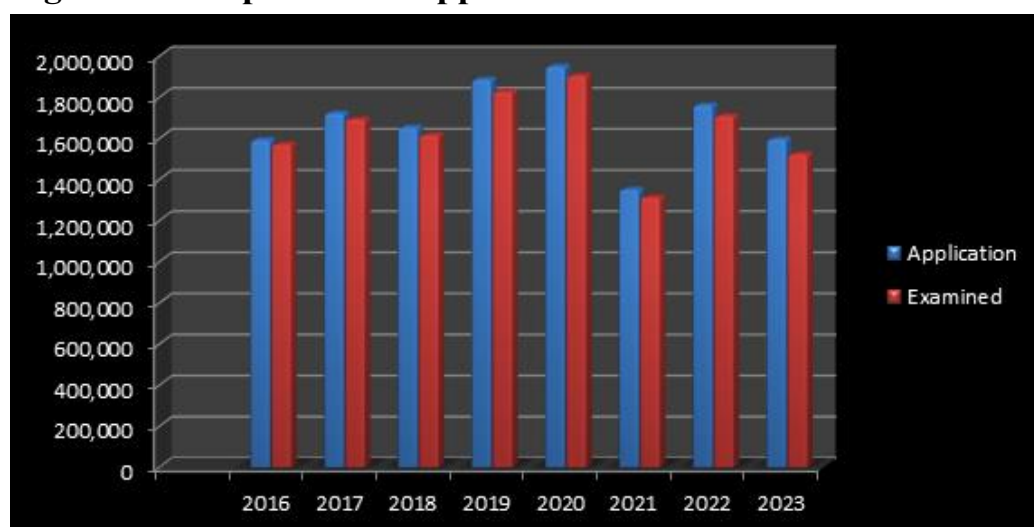
facilities, economic/high cost of attendance, rigidity in admission processes, geography, rigidity of academic programs/structure and lack of diversification, strict norms and ethical standards, and socio-cultural perceptions. This study highlights the systemic factors that hinder undergraduate access in private universities, given that research is sparse in this area. Thirdly, the lack of support from government was consistently acknowledged by the Vice Chancellors of private universities, coupled with resource limitations leading to high tuition, thus creating a barrier to undergraduate access. Research recommends private universities should collaborate rather than compete, advocating for policy changes that include them in TETFUND support.

A comparison of application received from candidates for university entrance examination by JAMB and total number of candidates examined (see Table 1) showed that there is little difference in the number of candidates who applied for the Universal Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and those who were examined (see Figure 1). This indicates that most of the candidates who registered for the examination sat for it, with over 42,000 absentee candidates on average between 2016 and 2023.

**Table 1: Application Figures (Baseline Information from JAMB Policy Documents 2015-2023)**

Year	Application (UTME)	Number of candidates examined (*Excluding Direct Entry candidates)	Absentees
2015	1,475,600	-	
2016	1,592,462	1,570,206	22,256
2017	1,722,269	1,692,230	30,006
2018	1,653,127	1,615,611	37,516
2019	1,886,509	1,826,839	59,670
2020	1,949,983	1,904,587	45,396
2021	1,351,284	1,312,992	38,292
2022	1,761,262	1,708,834	52,428
2023	1,595,779	1,522,830	72,949

**Figure 1: Comparison of Application and Examined Candidates**

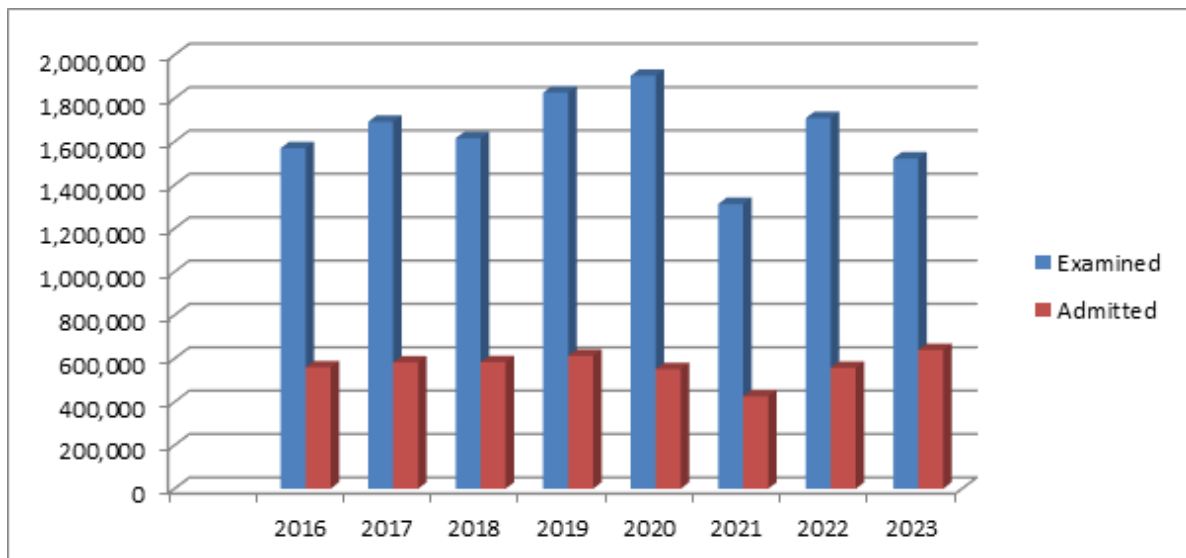


The figure on the comparison of examined and admitted candidates showed that although a large number of candidates applied for JAMB (Table 2); however, very few of such candidates (about a third) eventually got admitted into the various institutions (see Figure 2).

**Table 2: Number of Candidates Admitted**

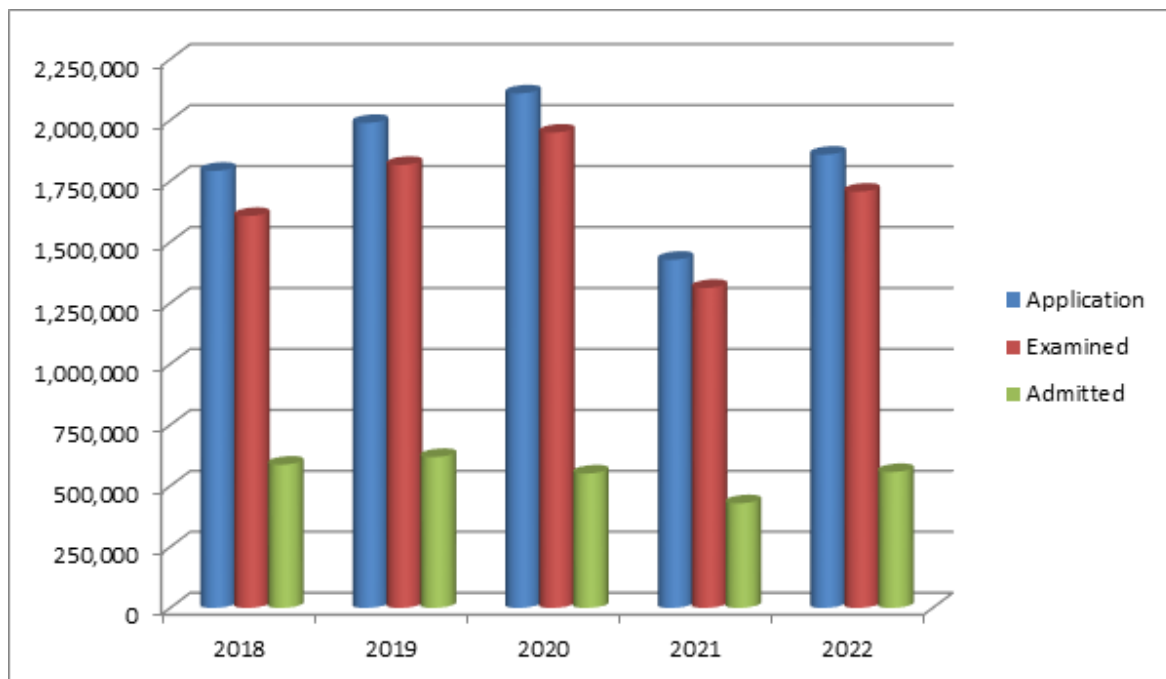
Year	Admitted as per different policy documents
2015	485,338
2016	559,458
2017	582,681
2018	583,250
2019	612,557
2020	551,553
2021	425,410
2022	557,625
2023	639,263

**Figure 2: Comparison of Examined and Admitted Candidates**



A comparison of applications, examined, and admitted candidates (Figure 3) showed that there is a slight difference between the number of applications received from interested candidates and those who were eventually examined. That is, not every candidate who applied to sit for the UTME sat for the examinations. However, there is a huge disparity between the number of candidates examined and those who got admission into the universities.

**Figure 3: Comparison of Application, Examined, and Admitted Candidates**



#### Admissions and Utilisation of Quota (Selected Years)

- Private universities filled less than half of their allocated admission quotas annually
- Admission Quota Utilisation Rates:
  - Federal Universities: Approximately 49% of quota used annually
  - State Universities: 35%
  - Private Universities: Only 16%, with 60% of allocated slots remaining unused

The data generated from the quantitative data revealed that although many candidates applied for JAMB, majority of them were examined but only few got admitted eventually. Comparison of application, examined, and admitted candidates showed a slight difference between application and examined candidates, but a significant difference between examined and admitted candidates. Also, the data revealed that the quota allocated by the NUC for the universities were not met, which may be as a result of failure or not meeting the examination criteria.

## Conclusion

Expanding undergraduate access in private universities continues to be increasingly important across Nigeria's six geopolitical zone given increasing population. Expanding access to higher education in Nigeria's private universities requires a multifaceted approach that addresses financial barriers, societal perceptions, and institutional limitations. The study's findings emphasise that while revisions to private university policies are important, government involvement, particularly in funding and policy reform, is paramount to overcoming the institutional barriers that limit access to higher education in private universities.

The focus on TETFUND and its implications reflects the broader need for an inclusive higher education funding structure that supports both public and private institutions. This would help to reduce financial constraints, improve infrastructure, and enhance access to higher education in Nigeria. Government involvement, through financial support and policy reforms, is crucial to improving the accessibility and affordability of private university education.

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