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IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND CLASSROOM QUALITY
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Abstract:

This paper looks at the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board's (JAMB) recent publication of cutoff grades for admission to Nigerian universities, monotechnics, polytechnics, and colleges of education. The cutoff points for university admissions in 2022/2023 were established at 140 out of 400 (35.0%) and 100 out of 400 (25.0%) for polytechnics and colleges of education. This decision has sparked outrage among educational stakeholders and the general public, particularly because of the perceived low cutoff mark for prospective teachers. This raises concerns regarding the caliber of teachers who will engage in the teacher development program. Given the importance of education to national development, the research aims to investigate the varied character of this issue, examine its ramifications, and make recommendations to improve teacher education in Nigeria. The purpose is to populate classrooms with competent and highly qualified teachers, hence fostering educational growth and advancement.

Keywords: Cutoff mark, Criticisms, Admission, Teacher Education, Teacher Quality

Introduction

The complex dynamics of educational standards and admissions procedures in Nigeria's higher education system have recently come under close scrutiny. The announcement of cutoff marks by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) for the 2022/2023 admissions session, in particular, has sparked a frenzy of controversy and confusion among educational stakeholders and the general public. The significance of the issue stems from the consequences it has for higher education especially teacher education and, as a result, the quality of instruction in the nation's classrooms. Notably, the cutoff values for universities have been set at 140 out of 400, accounting for just 35.0% of the total. This figure signifies a level of attainment that may seem surprisingly low to many, raising concerns about the quality of prospective university students and their preparedness for higher education. In addition to the cutoff marks for universities, JAMB has also set specific thresholds for admission into polytechnics and colleges of education. For these institutions, the established cutoff mark stands at 100 out of 400, representing a modest 25.0% requirement for candidates seeking entry. This might be because polytechnics and

colleges of education have less students requesting admission than universities (Aghahowa, Osawaru, Ogeleka, & Musa, 2014). Such a relatively lower standard ignites apprehension on the implications of admitting students with scores falling below the traditional standards typically expected from these institutions especially those of pre-service teachers who will be saddled with the responsibility of transmitting relevant knowledge, skills and attitude to learners in the near future.

The prevailing sentiment among critics is that education, being an enterprise of profound significance should never be entrusted to those who fall short of excellence. It is argued that lowering the bar for admission into teacher education programs jeopardizes the quality of instruction, potentially hampering the development and future prospects of Nigerian students. The apprehension surrounding this issue stems from the recognition that a nation's progress and prosperity hinge upon the caliber and capabilities of its educators.

In light of these pressing concerns, the purpose of this paper is to comprehensively examine the dimensions of this intricate problem and delve into its far-reaching implications. By elucidating the multifaceted nature of the issue, this study seeks to shed light on the potential ramifications of reduced cutoff marks for teacher education, aiming to stimulate thoughtful discourse and offer recommendations for the advancement of the Nigerian education system.

The Role and Function of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in Setting Admission Standards

The Federal Government of Nigeria established the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 1978 to manage the admission process to higher education (Aghahowa & Omoregbe, 2017). The mission of JAMB is to establish a single standard for the administration of matriculation examinations and the admission of appropriately competent candidates to the nation's tertiary institutions (Asein & Lawal, 2007). They are the central authority in charge of conducting the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and enabling admission to higher education institutions for eligible applicants. The objective of the Board is to maintain uniformity and consistency in the admissions process, ensuring equal opportunity for all candidates regardless of their background. To that aim, JAMB defines cutoff marks as benchmarks for computing the minimum grades necessary for admission to universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education.

According to Asein and Lawal (2007), the cut-off grades for admission vary by institution depending on the competitiveness of the intended field of study and the extra consideration given to local residents and students with educational disadvantages. These thresholds establish a student's eligibility to pursue particular academic certifications or degrees. The establishment and implementation of cutoff marks play a pivotal role in the Nigerian higher education system, shaping the trajectory of students' academic journeys and determining their access to various institutions. The Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) assume the

responsibility of ensuring fairness, standardization, and transparency in the admission process across universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education.

This dichotomy in cutoff marks for different types of higher education institutions has intensified the perplexity surrounding the fairness, equity, and quality of admissions processes in Nigeria. The striking differences between the thresholds set for universities and those for polytechnics and colleges of education stirred an array of emotions and concerns regarding the potential impact on the caliber of students entering these respective institutions.

Criticisms and Concerns

The release of the cutoff marks has not gone unnoticed by the general public, with many individuals expressing their discontent and confusion. Questions and criticisms have emerged, centering around the fairness and competitiveness of the admissions process. Concerns have been raised about the potential consequences of admitting students who have achieved scores that may fall below the traditionally expected standards. One of the prominent voices that spoke against it is Oyewusi Ibidapo-Obe, a former vice chancellor of University of Lagos (UNILAG), who suggested that it should be 250 for university and 200 for Polytechnics and colleges of education. He observed that lowering cut-off mark would reduce quality of education as well as quality of graduates tertiary institutions would produce. The issue of the quality of graduates produced by Nigerian higher institutions has generated concerns over the years. For example, the Nigerian Institute of Personnel Management, NIPM, (cited in Anho, 2011) noted that the quality of graduates from our higher institutions is declining rapidly. Anho also cited the report of National Employers Consultative Association (NECA) which decried the quality of Nigerian graduates who they argue “do not meet the demands of industry”.

Within the context of teacher education, the implications of the established cutoff marks are particularly disconcerting. The lowered admission standards raise valid concerns about the quality of individuals entering teacher development programs. There is a growing apprehension regarding the ability of these prospective teachers to acquire the requisite knowledge, pedagogical skills, and competencies necessary for effective classroom instruction. The worry stems from the understanding that the quality of teachers significantly impacts the learning outcomes and future prospects of students. Diminishing the admission standards for teacher education programs raises questions about the long-term consequences on the educational landscape, as the nation's classrooms rely heavily on the expertise and capabilities of teachers. The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), recently, appealed to the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) to increase the cut-off marks for candidates seeking admission to study education courses in colleges and universities across the country. TRCN noted that this is necessary in order to make admission into colleges and faculties of education stricter and will help to ensure that the best brains enter the teaching profession. In 2022, the

Nigerian Senate also made a similar call on JAMB to increase cut-off marks for students intending to study education courses at tertiary institutions in order to get the best brains into the teaching profession. The Vice Chairman, Senate Committee on Basic and Secondary Education, Dr Akon Eyakenyi made this appeal while monitoring the ongoing National Personnel Audit by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). The low cutoff marks for colleges of education therefore ignite fears regarding a potential dilution in the quality of teachers being produced. The concern is about the ability of these prospective teachers to demonstrate subject mastery, critical thinking skills, and the capacity to inspire and engage students. The worry extends beyond academic qualifications to encompass the broader skill sets, including communication, creativity, and classroom management, which are essential for effective teaching. It also raises questions about the extent to which these programs can produce competent and proficient teachers who can meet the evolving demands of modern education.

The implications of lowered admission standards for teacher education programs have far-reaching consequences for classroom instruction. Educators and researchers emphasize the crucial role the teacher plays in facilitating optimal learning experiences and nurturing the intellectual growth of students. With the potential influx of teachers who will enter the profession based on reduced cutoff marks, concerns arise regarding their ability to deliver high-quality instruction that meets the needs of diverse learners. This raises questions about the potential decline in the overall instructional standards within classrooms, which could hinder students' academic progress, intellectual curiosity, and future success.

Education as a Cornerstone of National Development: Unveiling the Significance and Role of Teachers

Education stands as a cornerstone of national development, playing a pivotal role in shaping societies and driving progress. Education is basic to national development and the standards and quality of the educational system and the capacity to innovate, determine the place of growth and development of a nation (Olusegun, 2021). It serves as a catalyst for social, economic, and political advancement, empowering individuals with knowledge, skills, and competencies that contribute to personal growth and overall well-being. Moreover, education equips individuals with critical thinking abilities, problem-solving skills, and a broader understanding of the world, fostering informed citizenship and active participation in the development of a nation.

Teachers have a critical role in nation-building within the field of education. They are the guiding light that moulds future generations' brains, teaching knowledge, morals, and a hunger for lifelong learning. Teachers not only teach subject matter but also function as mentors, role models, and promoters of social cohesion. Their effect goes beyond the classroom as they foster students' intellectual, emotional, and moral growth, preparing them to be engaged members of society.

Teachers, as change agents, influence the direction of a country's growth through encouraging students' critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. They play a vital role in cultivating the next generation of leaders, professionals, and responsible citizens who can address complex societal challenges. Through their dedication, expertise, and passion, teachers have the power to ignite the flames of curiosity, inspire greatness, and unlock the untapped potential within each student. Recognizing the significance of education and the pivotal role of teachers, it becomes imperative to ensure that the teacher educational system attracts, retains, and nurtures high-quality educators. Quality teacher education needs quality students too and it is believed to play a significant role in the education quality improvements in general education schools (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2011; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2016). Only by valuing and investing in teachers can a nation secure a prosperous future built on a solid educational foundation.

Implications of Low Cut-off Marks for Colleges of Education on Teacher Education and Quality Teacher Production

The establishment of low cut-off marks for colleges of education raises significant concerns regarding the implications for teacher education, the standard of instruction, and the production of quality teachers for the classroom. One of the primary implications of low cut-off marks for colleges of education is the potential dilution in the quality of teachers being produced. With lower admission standards, there is a valid concern that colleges of education may become a destination for academically weaker students or those labeled as the "never-do-wells" in academic circles. This shift in admission standards may result in a diminished pool of candidates who possess the necessary academic competencies and potential for effective teaching. As Eketu (2017) puts it, "the intention to give admission to candidates who scored as low as 30% implies that candidate with very low academic ability will be admitted and this will bring pressure on the school system as lecturers will be expected to spend more time explaining knowledge that the students are expected to have known before their entry into higher institutions.. According to him, this will demand more credit hours and efforts that are usually not available and he recommends that the programme time should be elongated beyond the minimum number of years.

The lowered admission standards may hinder the colleges of education's ability to attract candidates with a strong foundation in subject mastery, critical thinking skills, and intellectual curiosity. These qualities are vital for teachers who aim to inspire and engage students, fostering an environment conducive to effective learning. By admitting students with lower academic scores, colleges of education risk compromising their capacity to produce competent and proficient teachers who can meet the evolving demands of modern education. The implications go well beyond mere academic credentials, encompassing a huge array of broader skill sets required for the art of effective teaching. It is not just necessary to have pedagogical knowledge; rather, the ability to communicate effectively, be creative, manage

classes successfully, and instill a love of learning are all essential components of a teacher's competence. Regrettably, the relaxed admission standards prevalent in colleges of education raise legitimate concerns regarding the capacity of these programs to adequately nurture such essential skills in their aspiring educators. This lack of skill development may have far-reaching consequences for the overall quality of education in classrooms, potentially limiting students' academic growth, suppressing their intellectual curiosity, and compromising their future successes.

Furthermore, setting low cut-off scores for schools of education has ramifications that extend beyond the sphere of education and into the fundamental fabric of Nigeria's growth. Education is an undeniable pillar of national success, and the quality of teachers plays a critical part in establishing a country's growth course. Producing competent and capable teachers is crucial for successful information transfer, the development of critical thinking abilities, and the building of a well-informed and skilled workforce.

There is an inherent danger of undermining the educational landscape of the country by lowering admission criteria for colleges of education. Teachers' expertise and capacities have a significant impact on students' learning results and future prospects. Weakening the requirements for teacher education programs gives rise to concerns about the long-term consequences for the quality of instruction in classrooms, potentially impeding students' intellectual maturation and overall development. Moreover, the consequences of low cut-off grades for colleges of education may continue a negative cycle in which these schools are branded as collectors for intellectually weaker students. This perspective diminishes the intrinsic worth and prestige of pursuing a career in education, discouraging academically capable persons from considering teaching as a noble profession. The repercussions of such a tendency might include a scarcity of highly trained and motivated persons joining the teaching profession, resulting in a shortage of quality educators capable of pioneering productive educational landscape reforms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the implications of low cut-off marks for colleges of education in Nigeria have far-reaching consequences for teacher education, the production of quality teachers, and the overall development of the nation. The potential dilution in the quality of teachers being produced and the perceived devaluation of the teaching profession raise concerns about the future of education in Nigeria. Addressing these implications and reevaluating admission standards for colleges of education are essential steps towards ensuring the availability of competent and skilled teachers who can contribute to the educational progress and national development of Nigeria. Therefore, it is crucial to adopt stricter entrance requirements and reconsider the cut-off scores for colleges of education. Implementing these reforms successfully depends on cooperation between the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), educational stakeholders, and colleges of education.

Recommendation

1. Higher admission criteria should be established by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in partnership with educational stakeholders to guarantee the admission of academically qualified and driven individuals into programs for teacher preparation.
2. Colleges of education should be made more attractive by prioritizing improving the quality and rigor of their teacher preparation programs. This may be accomplished by upgrading curricular frameworks and aligning them with current educational research and best practices. Future teachers should be equipped with broad pedagogical knowledge, practical teaching abilities, and efficient classroom management strategies.
3. It is crucial to raise public understanding about the critical role of teachers in national development. Public campaigns should emphasize the importance of teaching as a profession and celebrate teachers' accomplishments and services. This will assist in attracting brilliant individuals to the teaching profession as well as garnering public support for measures targeted at strengthening teacher education.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can address the challenges posed by low cut-off marks for colleges of education and strive towards the production of quality teachers. These measures will contribute to the development of a robust education system that empowers students, enhances learning outcomes, and fosters the overall growth and development of the nation.

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