

**PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS' SOCIO-ECONOMIC VARIABLES
ON ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN
RIVERS STATE**

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Abstract

The study assessed the perceived influence of students' socio-economic variables on access to university education in public Universities in Rivers State. The design adopted for the study was descriptive survey. Five research questions were raised and five corresponding null hypotheses were formulated for the study. The population of the study comprised 66, 344 First year students, out of which 698 first year students were sampled for the study using random sampling technique. Data for the study was collected using a 30-item questionnaire titled "Students Socio-Economic Variables and Access to University Education Questionnaire" (SSEVAUEQ) with an index of 0.82. Research questions were answered using percentage while the hypotheses were tested using Chi-square statistic at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study showed that students' ethnicity, family size and age significantly influenced their access to university education (χ^2 -cal. 13.31 > χ^2 -crit. 5.99, χ^2 -cal. 10.68 > χ^2 -crit. 5.99, and χ^2 -cal. 15.11 > χ^2 -crit. 5.99 respectively), while parental income and gender does not significantly influence their access to university education (χ^2 -cal. 1.93 < χ^2 -crit. 5.99 and χ^2 -cal. 0.03 < χ^2 -crit. 3.84 respectively). Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that age limit for students seeking university admission should be removed to give students of all ages access to university education at the completion of their secondary education.

Keywords: Students, Socio-Economic, Access, University Education, Rivers State

Introduction

The educational system in Nigeria is classified into three basic levels namely primary, secondary and tertiary education as specified in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Among the educational institutions at the tertiary level, the university is regarded as the apex and this may explain why attention is always drawn to the university system among prospective tertiary education admission seekers. The increase in the demand for university education in the country is also attributed to the excess emphasis on certification as a prerequisite for job opportunities and other social and economic benefits. This may explain why students' attention is always focused on securing admission into any available university.

Access to university education is relevant for meeting different individual and societal needs. Students who have access to quality university education have a better opportunity of acquiring the knowledge, skill and attitude needed to live meaningfully within the society while the society benefits by acquiring the needed manpower in the different sectors of the economy for growth and development. However, Mahabub (2014) pointed out that there are factors that make access to University education difficult to achieve such as economic constraints, inadequate finance, sex discrimination, lack of infrastructure among others. This is why parents, students and other educational stakeholders resort to other available means to ensure that their educational aspiration is not obstructed despite these challenges.

According to the National Universities Commission (2019), there are currently 174 Universities in Nigeria comprising 43 Federal Universities, 52 State Universities and 79 Private Universities. Surprisingly, Parr (2018) pointed out that these 174 universities have a carrying capacity of about 850, 000 students while applicants seeking admission to universities each year is about 1, 700, 000 (Jeremiah, 2017). The balance of those who cannot be admitted each year are pushed to subsequent years while others seek for alternatives such as schooling abroad, learning a trade and so on. However, some of the students who finally secure admission for the period into universities

sometimes base their success on some social and economic factors which are in their favour.

There has been an increasing argument among educational stakeholders as to whether the social and economic orientations of students affect their educational prospects. Broer, Bai and Fonseca (2019) opined that often times, the socio-economic status of students is measured from the occupation of students' parents. It is therefore believed that students from wealthy families stand a better chance of achieving their educational goals than others. Students who have parents with high level of income stand a better chance of acquiring basic educational needs (Korir, Misigo and Ngeno, 2017) and this influence may spread to a higher prospect of securing admission into universities of their choice including the public Universities.

Furthermore, the campaign for gender equality across all public institutions in the country also has its impact on educational institutions. Similarly, there are professions that are gender sensitive in Universities across the country and as such the gender of students may play a major role in increasing their chances of being admitted in the university when the opportunity is available. In the same vein, there are families where the family size stands as a motivating or hindering factor to the prospect of students gaining access into the university. It is therefore yet to be ascertained the extent to which the social and economic variables relating to students and their immediate family affects positively or negatively their chances for university education. This is the problem for which this study intends to investigate.

There are different social as well as economic factors which often give some university admission applicants an edge over other in different Universities in Nigeria. The parental income or financial ability of some of these students gives them an advantage in getting admission into private universities where huge fees are often being charged which is usually unaffordable for students whose parents are low income earners. Similarly, it is a common practice that some of the State universities in the country give their indigenes more opportunities in terms of admission compared to those from other States. Some of these universities also set age limit before students can gain admission and this has seen some qualified students waiting for a longer time to gain admission even after graduating from secondary school with good grades. It is also a common practice in rural families with large family

size to send some children to the university while others learn a trade (Akpan and Undie, 2007) as a result of the low income level which does not favour their large family size. Some of these families choose to send their male children to the university since it is believed that the female ones will be given out in marriage without any economic benefit to the family. These factors go a long way to determine the prospect of an applicant getting admission into the university either in the short or long run.

The lack of access to university education has diverse socio-economic implications. Itegi (2015) pointed out that lack of access to university education contribute greatly to the issues of congested classrooms in available universities, pressure on available facilities, educational inequality, emotional detachment and lack of sense of belonging, reduced manpower for national development, social vices among others. These implications have negative effects not only on the admission applicants but also on universities, communities, parents and the nation at large. This development calls for timely intervention to correct this anomaly.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigated the perceived influence of students' socio-economic variables on access to university education in public universities in Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine the influence of students' ethnicity on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
2. determine the influence of students' parental income on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
3. ascertain the influence of students' family size on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
4. identify the influence of students' gender on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
5. identify the influence of students' age on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

Research Questions

The following questions were answered in the study:

1. What is the influence of students' ethnicity on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?
2. What is the influence of students' parental income on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?
3. What is the influence of students' family size on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?
4. What is the influence of students' gender on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?
5. What is the influence of students' age on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between students' ethnicity and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
2. There is no significant relationship between students' parental income and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
3. There is no significant relationship between students' family size and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
4. There is no significant relationship between students' gender and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State
5. There is no significant relationship between students' age and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

Methodology

Design adopted for the study was descriptive survey. The population of the study comprised 66, 344 First year students (29,603 male and 36, 741 female) in the three public Universities in Rivers State out of which 698 (349 male and 349 female) were randomly selected for the study. The minimum sample size of the study was determined using Cochran's

sample size determination formula. The instrument used for data collection was a 30-item questionnaire titled "Students Socio-Economic Variables and Access to University Education Questionnaire" (SSEVAUEQ). The instrument was validated by two Measurement and Evaluation experts in the Department of Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, University of Port Harcourt. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach alpha statistic and produced an index of 0.82. The research questions were answered using percentage while the hypotheses were tested using Chi-square at 0.05 level of significance.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question One: What is the influence of students' ethnicity on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?

Table 1: Influence of students' ethnicity and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

Response Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly Agreed	144	20.6	20.6
Agreed	368	52.7	73.3
Disagreed	115	16.5	89.8
Strongly Disagreed	71	10.2	100
TOTAL	698	100	

Table 1 showed that 144 students representing 20.6% strongly agreed that students' ethnicity influenced their access to university education while 368 students which was 52.7% agreed that ethnicity influenced students' access to University education. Furthermore, 115 students which was 16.5% as well as 71 students which was 10.2% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively that their ethnicity influenced their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State.

The influence of students' ethnicity on access to education has been an issue of argument among educational stakeholders. There are

schools of thought that believe that ethnicity and race does not influence students' prospect of admission into available universities. However, this tend to differ in reality as some prospective university admission seekers have lost their slots over the years to indigenes of available universities especially in state owned Universities. The findings of this study however substantiated the fact that students ethnicity has an influence on their access to university education. This finding aligns with a related study conducted by Espinosa, Turk, Taylor and Chessman (2019) which identified race and ethnicity as one of the salient factors affecting access to higher education in the United States of America among other factors such as income, wealth, geography and age. It is therefore believed that students ethnicity and race plays a salient influence on students' access to university education.

In a study by Maestri (2017), he quipped from his finding that ethnic diversity has a positive impact on the test scores of minority students, in particular for language skills. This finding therefore suggested the fact that the influence that ethnicity has on students access to university education may be as a result of their ethnic advantage in terms of admission criteria which gives these students an advantage during university admission. Therefore, aside ethnic bias which is sometimes prevalent in most state owned universities, students ethnicity can determine their access to university education when such factor gives students an advantage during test scores, access to educational resources which can determine their access to university education.

Research Question Two: What is the influence of students' parental income on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?

Table 2: Influence of students' parental income and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

Response Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly Agreed	149	21.3	21.3
Agreed	487	69.8	91.1
Disagreed	38	5.4	96.5
Strongly Disagreed	24	3.5	100
TOTAL	698	100	

In table 2, it was revealed that 149 students (21.3%) strongly agreed to the fact that their parental income influenced their access to university education while 487 students which was 69.8% agreed that parental income has an influence on their access to university education in the public universities in Rivers State. Furthermore, another 38 students (5.4%) disagreed while 24 students (3.5%) strongly disagreed on the fact that parental income influences their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State.

The influence that parental income has on access to university education is sometimes attributed to the fact that students with parents who have higher income status are better positioned to procure learning materials needed for preparation into higher institutions of choice as well as pay the required fees no matter the amount. A similar study by Drajea and O'Sullivan (2014) indicated a significant relationship between parents' income and literacy levels and the quality of support to their children's education. Students who have parents with higher income level sometimes stand at an advantage to access learning resources which determines their literacy level which also determines their access to university education. This does not however mean that parents sometimes do not use their income level to influence access of their children to university education. Parents whose children cannot gain admission into the university to an extent use their economic resources to find alternatives such as private universities for their children. This may explain why these students opined from their responses that income level of parents has an influence on their access to university education.

However, Chevalier, Harmon, O'Sullivan and Walker (2013) observed in their study that parental income does not relate significantly with schooling except with permanent income. This suggests that parents who do not have permanent income sources may not have what it takes to influence admission opportunities sustainably for their children. Students who gain access to university education through the income of their parents may be as a result of the opportunity they have to procure relevant resources with which they prepare for university education. Therefore, it can be deduced based on the findings of the study that parental income can influence students' access to university education from diverse areas.

Research Question Three: What is the influence of students' family size on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?

Table 3: Influence of students' family size and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

Response Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly Agreed	28	4.0	4.0
Agreed	137	19.6	23.6
Disagreed	516	73.9	97.5
Strongly Disagreed	17	2.5	100
TOTAL	698	100	

The responses of students on table 3 showed that 28 of them which represented 4% strongly agreed that their family size influenced their access to university education. However, 137 students which was 19.6% agreed, 516 students which was 73.9% disagreed and 17 students which was 2.5% strongly disagreed on the fact that their family size has an influence on their access to university education in the three public universities in Rivers State.

Parents of students from low income are sometimes forced to use all available resources to train the few members of the family when available resources cannot take care of the educational needs of all

their children. Similarly, parents with few number of children are likely to give all educational assistance to these children when they are few in number. This suggests that the quality of education of children who are few in number may be better than that of families with higher number of children all things being equal. Furthermore, Marbuah (2016) observed from a related study that household size and place of residence were revealed to have significant influences on years of schooling since larger household size meant shorter years of schooling for the child and smaller household size meant longer years of schooling, all things being equal. This means that aside gaining access to university education, when the family size is small, students have the prospect of even acquiring higher degrees compared to families with more children.

Parents who have larger family size and wish to increase the prospect of their children for higher education are more likely to seek for social support or other financial assistance in order to support these goals when available economic resources are inadequate. Argys and Averett (2015) reported in their study that education increased more for Chinese migrants born after the one child programme than their counterparts from other East Asian countries. This again contradicted the findings of this study as this means that the lesser the number of children, the more the prospect of students to acquire university education as well as higher degrees. However, family size must be properly managed in order to ensure that the right quality of education is achieved by university education seekers.

Research Question Four: What is the influence of students' gender on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?

Table 4: Influence of students' gender and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

Response Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly Agreed	43	6.2	6.2
Agreed	106	15.2	21.4
Disagreed	467	66.9	88.3
Strongly Disagreed	82	11.7	100
TOTAL	698	100	

On table 4, it was revealed that 43 students representing 6.2% of the respondents strongly agreed that their gender influenced their access to university education. In a related manner, 106 students which was 15.2% agreed that students gender influenced their access to University education. However, 467 students which was 66.9% disagreed while another 82 students which was 11.7% strongly disagreed on the fact that their gender influenced their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State.

The influence of students' gender on their access to university education is a debate that is yet to be clarified. This is because while admission process is based on merits, some educational policies which are gender sensitive have continued to increase the prospects of access to university education among male and female students. However, while the students sampled for the study showed that gender does not influence their access to university education, Guledani (2011) reported in a related study that from 2005-2009, the percentage of female students that continued their studies at Tbilisi State University was 60-65 percent, whereas the percentage of male students equals 35-40 percent. Providing further explanation for this, Adiya (2010) noted in his study that the introduction of gender equity policies has helped increased the access of female students to higher education. This implies that gender support which some of these students get from private as well as public institutions increases their prospects of access to university education. Clarifying further, Agboola and Ofoegbu (2010) observed in their study that a disparity existed in access to education among male and female students all over the country. It is therefore important for the government as well as university administrators to

put measures in place to check mate the variations between male and female students in terms of their access to university education in order to ensure quality and equity.

Research Question Five: What is the influence of students' age on their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State?

Table 5: Influence of students' age and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

Response Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly Agreed	14	2	2
Agreed	81	11.6	13.6
Disagreed	472	67.6	81.2
Strongly Disagreed	131	18.8	100
TOTAL	698	100	

Table 5 showed that 14 students (2%) strongly agreed that their age influenced their access to university education while another 81 set of students which was 11.6% agreed that their age has influence on their access to university education. Similarly, 472 of the students which was 67.6% disagreed while 131 students (18.8%) strongly disagreed on the influence that age has on their access to university education in the three public universities in Rivers State.

There is no doubt that the government has placed an age limit which students must attain before they can be admitted into higher institutions in the country. However, there is no age barrier as to when students can enter into the university after the age limit had been met. This may suggest why the respondents used for the study pointed out that their age does not influence their access to university education. However, in a contrary position, Fumagalli (2019) observed that young people are underrepresented in university education. This suggest the need for age limits for entering the university to be open as this tend to deprive young children who are qualified from entering into the university.

Furthermore, Torgerson, Gascoine, Heaps, Menzies and Younger (2014) asserted in the findings of their study that students age is one of the factors that determines access to university education. This again is at variance with the findings of this study. It is therefore important for age limits to be removed in order to prevent qualified students from being given access into the universities of their choice when all other requirements have been met.

Hypotheses: There is no significant relationship between students' socio-economic variables and access to university education in public universities in Rivers State.

Table 6: Relationship between students' socio-economic variables on access to university education in public universities in Rivers State

S/No	Variable	Categorization	χ^2 -cal.	χ^2 -crit.	Decision
1	Students Ethnicity	Hausa Igbo Yoruba	13.31	5.99	Rejected
2	Students Parental Income	Below 30,000 30,000-100,000 100,000 and above	1.93	5.99	Not Rejected
3	Students Family Size	Below 3 3-6 Above 6	10.68	5.99	Rejected
4	Students Gender	Male Female	0.03	3.84	Not Rejected
5	Students Age	Below 18 18-24 Above 24	15.11	5.99	Rejected

On table 6, it was revealed that the first value of χ^2 -cal. was 13.31 while the value of χ^2 -crit. was 5.99. Since the value of χ^2 -cal. was more than the value of χ^2 -crit., the null hypothesis was rejected indicating that there was a significant relationship between students' ethnicity and access to university education. This suggested that the ethnic group which applicants of university admission belong to determines their

prospect for admission. This is however common in State universities where the issue of indigene is usually considered in admission processes.

In the same vein, the second value of χ^2 -cal. which was 1.93 was less than the value of χ^2 -crit. of 5.99 and as such the null hypothesis was not rejected implying that there was no significant relationship between parental income and students' access to university education. However, this assertion contradicts the finding of the study conducted by Nshemereirwe (2016) which reported that university admission in Uganda often favours those in higher socio-economic status. The status of parents which includes their income level therefore influenced students' access to education and possibly education in general. This is however common mainly in federal universities where the issue of merit is considered than some private universities where ability to pay high fees determine prospect for university admission as well as choice of course of study.

Furthermore, the third value of χ^2 -cal. of 10.68 was more than the value of χ^2 -crit. of 5.99 and as such the null hypothesis was rejected implying that there was a significant relationship between family size and access to university education. This finding suggested that the lesser the family size, the higher the prospect of an applicant getting admission into the university. Families with large number of children may however find it difficult to secure admission for their children possibly because of the rising cost of university education or other culturally based factors such as the use of children as manual labour especially in rural communities.

It was also revealed that at an χ^2 -crit. value of 3.84, the value of χ^2 -cal. of 0.03 was higher and as such the null hypothesis was not rejected making the study to conclude that there was no significant relationship between students' gender and their access to university education. This finding suggested that the gender of university admission applicants has nothing to do with their access to university education. However, access to university education by any of these applicants may be as a result of other factors which may be within or outside their control such as their parental income and so on.

The last value of χ^2 -cal. of 15.11 was more than the value of χ^2 -crit. of 5.99 making the null hypothesis to be rejected suggesting that there was a significant relationship between students age and their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State. This

position aligns with the findings revealed in the study by Okhidoi (2016) which revealed that age-cohort analyses revealed a significant predictor of college access for all age-cohorts whose college entrance years ranged from 1994 to 2010 in Mongolia. Students who wish to gain access into the university can therefore use some of the social factors which give them advantage to secure admission into the university when the opportunity to do so arises.

Conclusion

The study concluded as follows:

Students' ethnicity, family size and age significantly influenced their access to university education in public universities in Rivers State. Students who are qualified should therefore take advantage of any of the factors which is in their favour to secure admission when the need arises.

Similarly, it was concluded that parental income and gender of students has no significant influence on access to university education in public universities in Rivers State. University admission applicants therefore need to consider alternative measures to securing admission into universities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made in line with the findings of the study:

1. The government needs to revisit admission policies such as the quota system so as to give students of different ethnic groups equal opportunities of gaining admission into the university.
2. Financial institutions as well as university administrators should be ready to provide financial assistance such as education loan for students who are seeking for admission into universities to pursue their educational aspirations to the desired level.
3. Since countries such as China have been able to enforce the One Child Programme (OCP), the government in Nigeria should develop a similar programme where specific number of children of the less privileged can be given access and trained to acquire the needed university education.

4. University administrators should plan their academic programmes to give students of different gender equal opportunity of being admitted into the university in order to ensure gender equality in university admission processes.
5. The age limits for admission seekers into the university should be removed to give intelligent students unhindered access to acquire university education at the completion of their secondary education.

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