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“Get to the bridge and I will help you to cross”: Merit, Personal Connections and Money in Access to Nigerian Higher Education

Chris Willott

Abstract: This article examines the methods students use to gain access to a university in Nigeria’s elite federal sector. It explains the relationships between three “currencies” – merit, personal connections and money – that are utilised by students to achieve their goals. I argue that influences representing the official rules – merit – and those representing semi-official or unofficial processes – personal connections and money – intersect in ways that reveal the complexity of the relationship between state and society in contemporary Nigeria. This analysis reveals that in this case the hybrid interpretation of the neopatrimonial state, which views official and unofficial norms as existing in parallel and suffusing one another, has more analytical value than its counterpart, the wholesale state privatisation thesis.

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Keywords: Nigeria, studies (university), access to educational institutions, state, neopatrimonialism

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For prospective students, gaining access to Nigerian higher education can be a complex process. They must make use of one or a combination of three discrete “currencies” (Bierschenk 2008) – merit, personal connections and money – in order to ensure entry. For the majority of students, this process has two stages: First, one must “get to the bridge”; that is, achieve satisfactory grades on their entrance examinations. Students may then make use of personal connections and money in order to ensure that their grades are taken into account and their place secured. Without these other “currencies”, therefore, merit alone may be insufficient. Merit can take students “to the bridge” but only when it is utilised alongside personal connections and/or money can most students “get across”. However, even this process does not include the very best students, who can gain entrance without recourse to the non-merit currencies, and the very worst, who will find entrance impossible whatever their wealth in money or in people.

Within the university, both official and unofficial processes are important, but it is the relationship between them that is critical for an understanding of Nigerian higher education and, by extension, the Nigerian state itself. Each member of academic staff is subject to pressures from colleagues inside the university to uphold the good name of the department, the faculty and the university as being “serious” and concerned with academic rigour and meritocracy. These pressures limit the ability of the individual to act according to other pressures, from both inside and outside the university, from colleagues, kin, friends and co-religionists, to circumvent official procedure. Students are forced to accept this situation, knowing that the opinions of staff differ significantly, and the attitudes of one staff member may change depending on the relationship between them. All of the above factors make the process of applying to Nigerian higher education a complex and difficult one for students.

In this article, I use empirical data on student entry to a Nigerian university to analyse the veracity of the neopatrimonial approach to the Nigerian state. This concept has become the dominant method of understanding the contemporary African state, but the majority of studies are based not on rigorous empirical work but on “anecdotal evidence” (DeGrassi 2008: 110) or “second-hand work, ‘armchair’ reflections and unconstrained impressionism” (Olivier de Sardan 2009: 39). In part, this article is intended as a corrective to this kind of approach.¹

1 I would like to thank Dibyesh Anand, Joe Devine and Mirco Göpfert for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, in addition to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

I argue that, while non-merit considerations, particularly the role of patronage and financial corruption, exert an influence over access to the university, to present the state as existing only for the particularistic advancement of those working in it – as the wholesale state privatisation approach does – is incorrect. Instead, the hybrid approach to the neopatrimonial state, which views official and unofficial norms as existing in parallel and suffusing one another, provides a much closer approximation to the reality of life in this Nigerian university.²

Setting and Methods

Nigeria's higher education system can be divided into three sectors: The federal sector is public and consists of approximately 30 institutions. This sector contains the country's oldest and most prestigious universities, and is intended to provide education to Nigerian students from across the country, though the system of catchment areas, discussed below, means that there is a regional element to admissions. The state sector is significantly less prestigious and the requirement of state universities to accept students regardless of their state of origin is *de facto* ignored. In practice, state universities give priority to indigenes of the state in their admissions processes, so indigenes need lower scores on the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board's (JAMB) University Matriculation Examinations (UME)³ to gain entry (Adeyemi 2001). This is not official policy but is accepted by all, primarily because state universities receive funding from the state governments in which they are situated, rather than the federal government. Private universities are a relatively recent phenomenon in Nigeria, and there is considerable diversity within this sector. A number of private universities are viewed as being better than the best federal universities, primarily due to their financial power and consequent ability to purchase items such as computers and new lecture theatres and to draw in high-quality academics; in contrast, certain other universities are seen as little more than "degree mills" that offer sub-standard qualifications to students desperate for a degree (Okebukola 2008).

2 I am not arguing that any of the characteristics of the Nigerian higher education system outlined here are uniquely Nigerian or uniquely African. All of the characteristics presented here can be witnessed in states across the world, albeit in slightly different form and character.

3 UME examinations were replaced in 2010 by the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME). It will take some time before the effects of this change are apparent, though the entrenched nature of the informal processes outlined here means it is likely many, if not all, will remain in some form.

For nine months in 2007 I carried out research in a federal university in the Igbo-speaking southeast of Nigeria using an ethnographic methodology.⁴ During this time, I collected data while simultaneously working as a lecturer, which helped me become accepted within the university and my department. During my research, I interviewed numerous staff and students about the processes they and others used to enter the university. I conducted over 100 interviews and observed the day-to-day running of my department during periods of teaching, exams and student entrance to the university. Although some staff members in my department were reluctant to allow me access to all arenas, I nonetheless gained a detailed understanding of the dynamics of the department, its personalities and its factions. The university is a large, multidisciplinary institution and has a good reputation nationally.⁵

The Nigerian Higher Education System

In this article, I use the higher education system as an example of more general patterns that are visible across the Nigerian public sector. The role of this sector in debates about the state is complex, and my choice of this arena as illustrative of broader state–society relations therefore requires explanation. Higher education institutions perform a number of functions and have been viewed by some as existing in a space that is neither state nor civil society, but part of both (Sall et al. 2003). In this role, the higher education system holds the state to account while also providing a source of debate on the future of society (Sall et al. 2003). In Nigeria, the university sector performs this function (Anugwom 2002), but academics have also been criticised for their co-optation by military rulers, who sought academic input into their regimes to provide a veneer of legitimacy (Jega 1995; Amuwo 2002). The university’s leadership role in society and its relationship with the highest echelons of government are, however, not its only function. It also exists to provide services to its citizens, and in this role it can be viewed as an important aspect of public sector service provision. It is this role that I focus on here. There are a number of reasons to argue that this arena is an appropriate site to view broader patterns of state–society relations in Nigeria.

First, the higher education system is an arena in which there are innumerable daily interactions between street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) and

4 I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for funding my research in Nigeria.

5 In this article I will use a pseudonym, the University of South Eastern Nigeria (USEN), for the university in which I carried out research. In addition, the department where I worked and all individuals have been given pseudonyms.

service users. It is through these encounters that a picture emerges of how Nigerians experience the state first-hand. My analysis therefore focuses on “the reality of [the state’s] routine functioning” rather than “its desired or perceived essence” (Blundo 2006: 802). Second, access to higher education institutions that are formally governed by “official” regulations is frequently achieved through “unofficial” avenues such as personal connections and money. Desire for higher education therefore helps to perpetuate social and cultural logics, also prevalent in wider society, that privilege kinship and corruption as means to achieve success. Last, Nigerian higher education is as much an arena of power struggles and political conflict as any other. It is not, as Amuwo (2002: 94) has sought to portray it, an oasis of idealism, “a merchant of knowledge and an incubator of ideas of both heuristic and developmental value” far removed from the vulgar displays and power and politics of the “practical world”.

Despite these assertions, it is important to acknowledge that no institution is emblematic of the functioning of the state as a whole (Migdal 2001; Olivier de Sardan 2008), and Nigerian universities have some unique characteristics (Young 1981; Mills 2006). While the broad patterns of state–society relationship witnessed at USEN are likely to be replicated elsewhere in the Nigerian state apparatus (Smith 2006), the university will also illustrate some exceptional features, such as some staff viewing the university as an institution with different values from the rest of society, and the influence of political ideology over rhetoric and patterns of association.

Corruption, Patronage and the Nigerian State

The theory of the African neopatrimonial state is posited on a lack of distinction between the public and private sectors. In its ideal-type form, the Weberian rational-legal state – upon which those political and bureaucratic apparatuses bequeathed to postcolonial African leaders are based – rests on the idea of complete separation between public and private spheres. In such a system, the bureaucrat is the servant not of his or her superior, but of an impersonal order (Weber 1964). The official exercises the powers of his or her office and treats each individual, be they superiors, subordinates or the public, impersonally. Outside the workplace, he or she is a private individual with ambitions and obligations but is “unable to use his [or her] public position to achieve them” (Clapham 1985: 45).

The neopatrimonial state is different, because the distinction between the public and private realms is not upheld in practice. There is, however, some disagreement within neopatrimonial state scholarship as to how this lack of distinction manifests itself: Is the public realm wholly subordinated

to particularistic demands, or do rational-legal logics continue to exert an influence? Some suggest that, in Africa, states are marked by the wholesale privatisation of the public sector (Médard 1982), or are little more than a mask for politics carried out on the basis of personal connections (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Booth et al. 2006). In systems like this, the theory goes, those with access to state resources do not use them for the public good; instead they are used to benefit only the official's associates or client group, a phenomenon termed "prebendalism". Joseph (1987) argues that this concept characterises the Nigerian state. These authors therefore suggest the coexistence of two separate spheres of society: the bureaucratic and the patrimonial. The bureaucratic realm makes the rules, but these rules are not enforced because personalistic, informal politics prevails. The only role for the public sector is as a vehicle for private advancement and accumulation. For the purposes of this article, I will term this approach the "wholesale state privatisation thesis".

The second viewpoint is that neopatrimonial states are hybrid states (Bratton and van de Walle 1997), in that their defining feature is "the *simultaneous* operations of patrimonial and legal-rational logics" (Therkildsen 2005: 37, emphasis in original). For Erdmann and Engel (2007: 104, emphasis in original), an understanding of contemporary Africa that concentrates solely on unofficial relations is misleading:

An understanding of politics in Africa which depicts *all* official relations as privatised or the *modus operandi* as being *essentially* informal does not reflect African realities. What we want to emphasise here is that there is more than a legal-rational façade. It is a daily experience that *not all* political and administrative decisions are taken according to informal rules determined by private or personal interests.

For these authors, neopatrimonialism is not marked by informal politics in a formal system but by the interrelationships between these two realms. Erdmann and Engel (2007: 105) argue further that "the patrimonial penetrates the legal-rational system and twists its logic, functions, and output". In addition to remarking on the continued importance of rational-legal norms in influencing behaviour, these authors therefore also comment on the way in which the two spheres interpenetrate. It is also important to comment that, unlike the other authors noted here, neither Therkildsen (2005) nor Erdmann and Engel (2007) are proponents of the neopatrimonial state paradigm. Instead they seek to assess the strength of neopatrimonial state claims and argue that some of the claims of neopatrimonialism are overblown and inappropriate. Olivier de Sardan (2009: 67) likewise argues that the most strident arguments concerning state privatisation advanced by neopatrimonial state authors are false:

[T]hese states are not “disintegrated” or phantom states [...]. The public service survives, albeit only in cobbled together and shaky forms; this should not be forgotten. These states are paradoxical and ambiguous, ranging between increasing informal privatisation and universally acknowledge[d] appalling quality of public service, on the one hand, and an undeniable capacity to reproduce somehow and succeed in maintaining a minimal level of public activities, on the other.

The dichotomy I have set up here, between two types of neopatrimonialism, is disputed by some authors. Both Therkildsen (2005) and Erdmann and Engel (2007) argue that the Chabal and Daloz definition (that the African state is “no more than a décor, a pseudo-Western façade masking the realities of deeply personalised political relations” (1999: 62)) suggests patrimonialism rather than neopatrimonialism, because no space is allowed to bureaucratic logics in influencing behaviour. They argue that neopatrimonialism involves, by definition, both patrimonial and bureaucratic logics. I disagree with this and argue that the approaches constitute two discrete forms of neopatrimonialism. It is the existence of political and administrative systems that are *formally constructed* on rational-legal lines (Clapham 1985: 48) that makes these states neopatrimonial rather than patrimonial.

In the next section, I will describe and analyse the methods students use to gain entry to USEN. I have divided my discussion into two parts, the first examining the official procedure as enshrined in the policies of the government and the university. The second section examines the way in which students actually gain admission to the university. I have structured my analysis in this way not in order to highlight deficiencies in actual practice compared to official procedure, but rather to illustrate the way in which two sets of norms reform and reconstitute one another. Official procedure is therefore viewed as an influence on actual behaviour rather than as a way of assessing the university normatively.

Accessing the University of South Eastern Nigeria

Higher education is very important for Nigerians, both as a marker of social status and as a way into the congested job market. Being a graduate has tremendous social importance, such that poorer families often decide to scrimp on other things in order to send just one of their children to university. A degree is increasingly seen as a yardstick of success and this has caused even un-academically inclined students to attend, or seek to attend, university. The combination of oversubscription, clamour for degrees and the prestige of USEN produce some desperation among those seeking to gain admission. This often leads students and parents to use any means

necessary to gain admission for themselves or their wards. Often this runs counter to official procedure, which emphasises high examination marks.

As in all higher education systems, demand for some courses is higher than others. This produces different minimum scores required to enter university to study a particular subject, which may be above what is known as university cut-off, the minimum score on UME. At USEN, departmental cut-offs, particularly for high-demand courses such as medicine, law and economics, are much higher than the overall university cut-off score of 200. Cut-offs for other, less sought-after courses, such as education and religion, are usually significantly lower.

Official Procedure

The official process of applying to and being accepted into Nigerian higher education is complex. National examinations are run by JAMB, but in recent years many universities, including USEN, have begun to run their own admissions exams post-UME in response to concerns about irregularities in UME. In 2007, USEN rules were that students were to be accepted on the basis of three criteria: merit, catchment area and Educationally Less Developed States (ELDS). Nigerian Federal Government guidelines for admissions were 45 per cent merit, 35 per cent catchment area and 20 per cent ELDS (Asein and Lawal 2007: 4). It is important to recognise that, even though only 45 per cent of places are reserved for “merit”, in fact merit has a role in all three application criteria: Those students with the best UME scores from each catchment area or ELDS state will – according to official policy – be admitted.

Merit

Officially, to enter USEN on merit, students have to first score over 200 (out of a possible 400) on their UME and then achieve five O-level passes on their West African Examinations Council (WAEC) or National Examinations Council (NECO) examinations. They are then eligible to sit the post-UME screening exam run by USEN. The top 45 per cent of students are admitted. Prior to 2005, students would take the same exams with the exception of the internal post-UME exam. This exam was introduced as a response to increasing fears over the prevalence of malpractice in UME and post-hoc manipulation of scores. A study carried out by a senior member of USEN staff (Udobata 2006) revealed that fewer than 15 per cent of students who scored highly (270 and above) on UME were able to score comparably (250 and above) on the internal screening exam. Post-UME screening has a significantly higher level of trust amongst staff and students at USEN.

However, though USEN did not consider UME scores sufficiently trustworthy to assess admission, they nonetheless considered them useful enough to assess which students could then take the internal screening exam. The problems with UME have led some to suggest that the body should be scrapped altogether and that universities should be able to independently decide which students to accept.

Catchment Area and Educationally Less Developed States (ELDS)

Nigeria's 36 states and its federal higher education institutions are linked by the principle of catchment areas, in which preference in admission is given to students whose states of origin are within the university's catchment area. States within the USEN catchment area are the five southeastern, predominantly Igbo states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo and the six south-south states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. The majority of people living in the south-south belong to Nigeria's minority ethnic groups.

Catchment areas are based on geopolitical as opposed to purely geographical considerations. For instance, JAMB places Benue state, in the ethnically diverse middle belt region, in the catchment area of the Universities of Jos and Ilorin, the Federal University of Technology, Minna, and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board 2007). Some of these universities are considerably further from Benue state than many federal universities in southeastern Nigeria, including the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Federal University of Technology, Owerri and Nnamdi Azikiwe University (Awka), and others in the south-south zone such as the Universities of Calabar, Port Harcourt and Uyo. The rationale behind this policy is to ensure that students from northern states that traditionally fare badly in UME examinations gain access to higher education by restricting a certain number of places in northern universities to candidates from these states (Adeyemi 2001). Demand for university places amongst southern students is considerably higher than amongst their northern counterparts (Akpan 1990).

Once students have been taken from the merit list of admissions, the university moves on to catchment area. The university will move down the list of students' scores, taking only those from catchment area states. If, for instance, the pharmacy department has to accept 33 students through catchment area, that means the top three students from each of the 11 catchment area states will be admitted.

There are 22 states designated by the federal government as educationally less developed, of which 19 are in the north of the country.⁶ The ELDS principle works rather like that of affirmative action in the US and seeks to close the gap between the higher-performing south and lower-performing north of the country (Adeyemi 2001). USEN employs the same principle for ELDS as for catchment area in that admissions officers move down the list of applicants and accept the first “x” number from each ELDS, depending on the quota for each course. The concept of ELDS is problematic in southern Nigeria as so few northern students apply and are accepted to southern universities.

Actual Process

The criteria set out above illustrate the federal government’s policy regarding access to higher education. However, the reality is quite different. Students enter the university through a variety of means, invariably involving one or a combination of three “currencies”: merit, personal connections and money (the latter known in local parlance as “lobbying”).

Merit

Regardless of other considerations, if your score on UME is not high enough, you will not gain entry to USEN. Even those students whose scores are high enough are not guaranteed entry; their exam score has got them “to the bridge”, and they can now take advantage of two additional methods of entry: the extra-legal (connections, lobbying) and the semi-formal (“vice chancellor’s list”, staff quota). Gifted but poor or unconnected students may lose out here, as their places may be taken by students who have done just enough in terms of merit but are better connected or richer. At the other end of the scale, students with the very highest marks will almost always gain entry regardless of their connections and ability and willingness to lobby. Those at the very top of the merit scale therefore almost always gain entry, and those at the very bottom almost never do.

These two phenomena suggest a similarity between this system and the one described by Young (1981) in academic staff entry to a university in Zaire, which made use of the concept of the “grey zone of ambiguity”. In

6 Educationally Less Developed States are Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kebbi, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe, and Zamfara in the north, Ebonyi in the southeast and Bayelsa, Cross River and Rivers in the south-south. There are no educationally less developed states in the southwest geopolitical zone.

this system, those at the very top and the very bottom of merit categorisations automatically receive the expected outcome: entry to university for those at the top, exclusion for those at the bottom. It is within the grey zone of ambiguity, the area between these two extremes, where non-merit considerations exert an influence. This is therefore a system that is not solely guided by informal logics – one in which official policy (merit) is by no means absolute but still has a role.

There is, however, a further caveat. The children of the rich or the well-connected are unlikely to apply to USEN with substandard grades, even if they are academically weak, as there are a number of “sharp practices” – a local term for extra-legal processes – that can be used to manipulate UME scores. The first of these is exam malpractice, which refers to a variety of different methods of cheating in exams but particularly the use of “micro-chips” (crib sheets, folded until tiny), collusion with invigilators and impersonation. Collusion with invigilators may manifest itself through invigilators helping students answer questions, allowing them to take textbooks into the exam hall or providing model answers. Links between students and staff that facilitate collusion may be financial or based on personal connections or both. Many well-to-do parents pay professional exam-takers to impersonate their wards in exams such as UME. *Post-hoc* sharp practice involves artificially inflating UME scores after the exam. This occurs through a variety of methods, including lobbying JAMB staff, using a connection within JAMB or the USEN admissions department or hacking into the JAMB website. UME has a reputation for “students paying for whatever score they want” (interview with academic staff member, 16 March 2007).

Opinions differ as to the proportion of students taking UME who benefit in some way from fraud or malpractice. One senior member of staff estimated that 20 to 30 per cent of students benefited in some way. However, Professor Valentine Udobata’s (2006) research on numbers of students with high scores on UME who went on to replicate these scores on post-UME screening reveal that numbers of students who benefit from “sharp practices” may be far higher.

Catchment Area and ELDS

Once the first, “merit list” of successful entrants has been released, extra-legal practices begin to have a significant impact. An interesting case is that of Israel Ezeh. Israel, a student from Ebonyi, an ELDS, scored highly enough on his UME exam to be admitted to study for post-UME screening and scored well enough to be considered for his chosen subject, psychology, even without his ELDS status. But despite his high score, Israel was not admitted. After having failed to secure admission, he went to see the only

person he knew who may have been able to help, a lecturer from his community who worked at USEN. There was no connection between Israel and the lecturer except that they were from the same community. The lecturer was able to speak to the vice chancellor on Israel's behalf, and his admission was secured. There can be little doubt that, had the rules governing ELDS been adhered to, Israel would have secured admission without requiring the intervention of the lecturer. Israel's problem gaining admission could not be put down to ethnicity, as he was from Ebonyi, the only Igbo ELDS. This illustrates the importance of narrower identities such as community and kinship rather than broader, pan-Igbo identity.

It is common for Igbo students and staff at USEN to apportion some of the blame for the poor quality of some university entrants to the "quota system" of ELDS and catchment area (see also Smith 2005). There is a perception that these policies are anti-meritocratic and particularly benefit poorer-quality students from Nigeria's northern region. It is possible that there is some truth in this, as it is certainly the case that, in particular, northern students tend to fare worse in education than southeasterners, but the anti-quota discourse is also part of an ethnically based narrative that puts blame for numerous ills upon those from the north of Nigeria (Smith 2005). Indeed, Adeyemi (2001: 310) comments that JAMB itself is seen by many southerners as a northern creation designed to assist northerners to catch up educationally. However, the number of northern students attending USEN is a tiny and falling proportion of the total (University of South Eastern Nigeria 2001–2006). In addition, it has been argued by Young (1981: 160) that universalism in access to African higher education may be "an expedient ideology of the privileged" designed to maintain that privilege. In terms of access to university, and particularly USEN, Igbos could certainly be regarded as privileged.

Semi-official Discretion

There are two forms of semi-official discretion in access to USEN: vice chancellor's (VC's) list and staff quota. These two methods of entry were, before 2005, termed "discretion" in federal government guidelines and officially accounted for 10 per cent of entrants to Nigerian universities. This aspect of entry has been removed *de jure* but still operates *de facto*. There are still approximately 10 per cent of places available through discretion, which can be split into two: VC's list, which covers "university interests" or "friends of the university" – meaning major donors – and staff quota, which covers children of staff or significant alumni. As such, therefore, semi-official discretion utilises the same currencies – personal connections and money – as extra-legal methods of entry.

Vice chancellor's list refers to places offered to students at the discretion of the vice chancellor. There remains a great deal of discretion-within-discretion in these admissions. It is not simply the case that if someone donates a certain amount to the university, their child will automatically be offered a place. Instead, they must first score over 200 on UME. They are then free to ask the VC if a place may be found for their child, a favour he (it is always a "he"; there has never been a female vice chancellor at USEN) may or may not grant. Senior university staff often receive calls from politicians asking for entry for their children, which places significant pressure on these staff as often the same politicians will later authorise the university's budget, and refusing entry to their child may have negative implications for the whole university.

Staff quota refers to the practice of providing staff members, as a form of benefit in addition to salary, with a place at the university for the member of staff's spouse or child, which is seen by staff as "one of the biggest perks of the office" (Smith 2005: 41). Despite the federal government's removal of discretion from official entry criteria, staff quota is still widely and openly used.⁷ There is significant overlap between VC's list and staff quota, with staff quota places often feeding into what becomes known as VC's list. This reflects the pressure put on senior members of staff such as the VC to accommodate candidates from a variety of different constituencies.

The semi-formal nature of these types of entry reveals much about the relationship between state and society in Nigeria. Until the federal government decided to remove discretionary entry, it had been officially enshrined in university policy that 10 per cent of entrants should be decided by the VC. This reflects, first, the extremely hierarchical nature of decision-making at USEN, where lower-ranking staff can make representations to the VC but he will always retain the final decision. Second, it illustrates the degree to which individuals cannot be conceptualised without reference to kinship ties. The fact that accepting students on the basis of their relationship with staff is widely accepted also illustrates the extent to which Nigerians view supporting kin as an essential obligation.

Extra-legal Methods of Entry

Extra-legal methods of entry are those used by students that are, and always have been, proscribed by law, though many of them are viewed as socially acceptable. These methods are used by students who have exhausted formal

7 Indeed, I was told during my fieldwork that, should my chosen candidate have a sufficiently high JAMB score, I could have a staff quota place myself. I did not take up this offer.

and semi-formal methods of entry. Students use a variety of different methods to secure admission. This process is highly complex and competitive, with those in a position to influence events coming under extreme pressure to assist their friends, relatives and co-religionists to help them gain a place. The lengths to which some students go to ensure admission, such as paying large sums to people who have no official connection with the university in the hope that they can help them gain entry, illustrates the importance of gaining entry to a prestigious university such as USEN. Use of extra-legal practices is, understandably, higher in high-demand courses. Students seeking to “lobby” their way into medicine, for instance, would find that the fee was considerably higher than for other subjects. The use of contractors or mercenaries – the term used by Nigerians to describe those who take exams for others in exchange for financial reward – is also higher for high-demand subjects.

There are limits to the numbers of students that can be accepted into university, though overall numbers have been rising the last few years (University of South Eastern Nigeria 2001–2006). The numbers of students gaining entry through extra-legal methods means that other students who have gained admission through official channels lose their places. At times during the admissions process, lists of names of students who have been admitted to study particular courses will be pinned up on noticeboards. However, during the process of compiling these lists, students’ names may be added through “backyard runs” – where lobbying or a connection to an influential person sees students’ names added to a list – resulting in the removal of other students’ names. It is therefore possible to gain entry through merit only to see your place taken by someone with a lower exam score but who has been able to manipulate the admissions system to their advantage. In cases such as these, the student whose name has been removed will be reluctant to question the decision because, first, it is unlikely to make any difference, and second, they fear that they may be “marked” as difficult and this may have a negative impact on subsequent applications, much like the “troublemaker toward whom favourable treatment should not be extended” in Lipsky’s research (1980: xiv).

Lobbying, as defined earlier, refers to a student gaining admission to the university through monetary payment. Students or their parents or friends may lobby academic or non-academic staff, particularly those who work in the admissions department, to help them secure a place. Lobbying is very common and is often closely linked to personal connections, which are used by students to assist them in gaining a place. If a prospective student seeks to lobby but does not have a personal connection, they may find that they lose their money on a fraudulent admission. The amounts of money

required to secure admission vary and are open to negotiation. Usually students find themselves paying over 50,000 NGN (approximately 200 GBP) to secure admission, with the figure being higher, sometimes up to 200,000 NGN (approximately 800 GBP) for higher demand courses.

Students may also try to use personal connections – often referred to as *imma mmadu* (IM), an Igbo term meaning “who you know” – to secure admission. Those outside the university will try to contact anyone working inside, but more senior academic staff, such as heads of departments, deans of faculty and those working in the admissions department, are most likely to be able to help. If there is a close connection – usually kin-based – between the member of staff and the prospective student, the student may not be required to pay, but in the vast majority of cases some payment, even if just a token gesture, will be required. Having a connection often means little more than knowing someone who you are then able to pay. Many lecturers and other staff are put under pressure from friends and relatives to assist in getting them or their wards into USEN.

There is a perception amongst outsiders that those on the inside are able to exploit the process as much or as little as they wish, and there is little understanding of the pressures that staff are under from others inside the university. In reality, the ability to manipulate admissions depends largely on the staff member’s position, senior academic staff and those in admissions having significantly greater ability to install their clients than others. Hierarchy is a very strong characteristic of USEN, with those at the top of the university hierarchy having huge scope to act as they wish. Those lower down, however, are subject to the whims of those above them.

Smith (2001: 353) comments on the impact of “social distance” in determining the amount of money changing hands in an informal encounter, of which a student seeking university entrance is a good example. He suggests that for close kin, no money whatsoever would need to change hands; for a looser connection – in Smith’s example, a friend of the sister of the person seeking a favour – money would need to be offered, while for a complete stranger the request would be rejected outright. This illustrates the need for personal connections even when the prospective entrant is able to pay. Three criticisms can, however, be made of Smith’s argument. First, he implies that social distance refers only to kinship and that friendship relations are invariably weaker than kin. My research illustrates that this does not always hold true and that a particularly strong friendship could, for instance, exert stronger pressure than weak kinship ties. Second, the implication of Smith’s work is that there is some implicit formula for calculating the level of “dash” – the money required to “grease the wheels” of any transaction – according to the level of connection. In fact, extra-legal processes are

much messier than this, and much more complicated; negotiation often plays a strong role, as do the seniority and wealth of the participants in the transaction. Third, I am unconvinced by Smith's assertion that a request from a stranger would be rejected. The decision to accept money from a stranger would likely be taken according to the circumstances of the transaction, and many Nigerians would not hesitate to accept the money.

Often, the precise relationship between prospective student and the person they seek to help them – sometimes referred to as the person's "saviour" – is important. The example of Emmanuel Adeniyi illustrates this well. Emmanuel applied to study mathematics education at USEN. He scored 209 on UME but the cut-off was 218, so Emmanuel was not admitted through merit. He decided to contact a man he described as his uncle – they had no blood relationship but came from the same community of origin – who was a former dean of faculty and senior lecturer. He described his uncle as "no-nonsense", meaning that he was interested in ensuring meritorious standards were maintained in the university. Emmanuel did not know his uncle directly so he decided he would try to "touch him from the soft spot" – approach him through someone the uncle was very close to, thus making him feel obliged to help.

Emmanuel's mother was very close to the prospective saviour's younger brother. She asked Emmanuel to write a letter explaining his predicament. The letter emphasised both Emmanuel's academic credentials and the closeness of the two families, who came from the same community. Another crucial factor is that the uncle was a close friend of Emmanuel's father. Emmanuel explained to me that the friendship between the man and Emmanuel's father was the factor that swung the request in his favour. This friendship would mean a degree of obligation over and above that felt through community ties.

Of perhaps equal importance to the relationship between student and saviour is the relationship between saviour and someone who is able to authorise a student's entrance into USEN, in this case the vice chancellor. Once again, the issue of obligation comes into play, but in this case combined with a notion of hierarchy – the obligation to assist those perceived to be of importance. Emmanuel's uncle wrote to the vice chancellor to explain Emmanuel's predicament. Without responding directly to either Emmanuel's uncle or Emmanuel, the vice chancellor added Emmanuel's name to the list of students admitted to study maths education.

It is clear that part of the reason for the decision was the seniority of Emmanuel's uncle. More junior staff – unless they had a different connection – would experience greater difficulty in getting through to the VC. Emmanuel was not asked to pay anything to his uncle for the assistance, in

contrast to Emeka Orji, a student who had paid 70,000 NGN for similar assistance. The biggest difference between the two cases is the seniority and possibly the wealth of the saviour involved, rather than the closeness of the relationship: Both saviours were members of the student's home community and family friends; Emmanuel's was considerably higher in the USEN hierarchy than Emeka's. The difference between the two cases could be seen to reflect a logic of appropriate distribution commented on by Smith (2005): It would have been inappropriate for Emmanuel's uncle, as a very senior member of staff, to ask for payment; for Emeka's saviour, who was much lower in the hierarchy, it would have been viewed as acceptable. Emeka did not voice any complaint at being asked to pay for the assistance he received.

Often having a connection means little more than asking this person for information regarding which courses are full. Information on places left on courses during the admissions process is not made public, so those with connections have an automatic advantage. It is not clear why the university chooses not to publish this information, but it is likely a combination of administrative lapses and a desire to ensure that the first opportunity to fill empty places goes to the well-connected. This echoes Blundo's (2006: 807) argument that in Senegal some administrative procedures are kept deliberately opaque in order that only certain people benefit.

Connections form a very important part of the process of accessing USEN, especially after the "merit" list has been published. For students not on this list, attempting to gain admission without the ability to lobby or any connection can be almost impossible. For those willing to pay but lacking connections, the situation may be even worse, as they may end up with a fraudulent application (see below). Lack of advice from an insider can make the process seem impossible to understand, as Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006: 140) comment when they characterise a different West African bureaucracy (Nigerien courts) as illustrating "the impenetrability of structures from the perspective of the anonymous user".

If a prospective student does not have a personal connection with a member of staff, he or she may still be able to utilise broader loyalties such as those around ethnicity to gain entry. The term "ethnicity" is commonly used to refer to groups of people who are members of broadly defined ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba, Igala, Tiv, and so on). This meaning is important at USEN but in a university where nearly 90 per cent of the students are Igbo, it can be narrower, intra-ethnic groupings that are of greater importance, as also noted by Van den Berghe (1973) and Young (1981) at the University of Ibadan, a predominantly Yoruba university. These sub-ethnic categories often intersect with official administrative units – states and Local Government Areas (LGAs). So, in access to USEN, an influential member

of staff may assist a student seeking admission on the basis of the fact that they are both, for instance, from Imo state. This illustrates the fact that in Nigeria “ethnic” loyalties are not primordial and constant, but may be opportunistic and open to change: An Ebonyi indigene, for instance, may give preference to a state-mate’s application to USEN, despite the fact that just 15 years ago, the two people were from different states and might have had distinctly different views on whether they owed each other loyalty. Ethnic loyalty in this case therefore stems from a closeness that appears primordial on the surface, and may feel so to the participants, but is actually mediated by the “modern” state. This point – that patterns of ethnic identification are influenced by administration as well as ethnicity – is made forcefully by Mustapha (2004), who argues that three of the seven major ethnic cleavages in Nigeria incorporate administrative units in ethnic rivalry.

If a student seeking entry to USEN has no connections whatsoever, he or she will often resort to the services of agents, who work unofficially to assist students to gain places to study. These people also help students pass courses once inside USEN, though securing admissions is their primary function. Their role is to provide students with the registration number they require to take up a place in exchange for financial reward. In many cases, agents will work for people inside the system, particularly lecturers and those working in the admissions department who want to make extra income but do not want to risk their positions by meeting prospective students directly. They therefore employ agents to act as intermediaries. Agents are often ex-students who already have close personal links with a lecturer or member of admissions staff who engages in “lobbying”. In many cases, the member of staff will inform the agent how much money they want for organising admission for a student. The agent then may, in addition to the cut they will receive from the member of staff, add their own mark-up. However, as with the price of almost anything in Nigerian society, these prices are subject to negotiation between the prospective student and the agent.

An important issue is that of false registrations. An agent, knowing how desperate students are to secure admission, will often provide a registration number they know is fake and “eat the [student’s] money”.⁸ Agents may tell students that they are closely linked to a senior member of staff in order to convince them to part with their money. Many students have gone through an entire university course of four years before they realised that their original registration was false. In this instance, the student will have to use other extra-legal methods to extricate themselves from their situation. One of my

8 “To eat” refers to the practice of taking something in exchange for providing a service but failing to provide the service promised. The phrase “to chop” is also used.

respondents gave an example of two friends, both of whom entered the university through agents, having been inadequately qualified originally. At the beginning of their final year, their qualifications were checked and found to be substandard so their registrations were removed. Both students were, at the time of the interview, still in the university trying to “beg their way out” of their difficulties (interview with student, 20 September 2007). One student comes from a rich family, so is likely to be able to pay her way out of her predicament, while the second is not, and is “just praying that something will happen” (interview with student, 20 September 2007). My respondent made the very clear case that having someone that you trust at the time of admission is crucial in minimising the chances of securing a fake admission. If you do not, it is “as good as throwing your money away for nothing” (interview with student, 20 September 2007).

Conclusion

In 2007, there was a great deal of complexity to the process students had to go through to gain entry to USEN. For those who applied with very high UME scores, entry was a formality. For those who could “bring” very little – a score of below 200 on UME – entry was almost impossible, even for those with strong connections to important and influential people or the ability and willingness to use money to gain entry. Despite the institution of the new UTME exam, it seems unlikely that this has changed fundamentally since then.

The data presented here suggest that the argument that the Nigerian state operates along entirely particularistic lines is unjustifiable. While patronage and corruption are at work in access to Nigerian higher education, they are not ubiquitous and do not define the system. The official rules, in the form of the standards required to gain entry to USEN, still have a role, in two ways: First, the best will gain entry and the worst will not, regardless of connections and money, meaning that for these students, merit is the primary currency used. It is, however, necessary to note the caveat that many students will ensure, through such practices as exam malpractice and lobbying JAMB, that they do not arrive at USEN with a low score. There may therefore be some students who arrive through “merit” but are not actually the best students, or who gain entry through a combination of merit and other means – achieving over 200 and then using connections or lobbying – who would have been eliminated entirely had the official rules been strictly adhered to. Second, even within the grey zone of ambiguity, there are limits to how many students staff members may admit through extra- or semi-legal processes. It is not the case that influential people can admit as

many of their kin or friends as they like. Local moral boundaries act to prevent abuses of this magnitude from occurring.

The system of entry to Nigerian higher education can therefore be best viewed as a hybrid, in which official and unofficial norms both exert an influence. It is, however, important to understand how the two realms interrelate. I argue that providers and users of USEN experience its operation as two different realms that are in a process of perpetual reform and reconstitution of one another. My research suggests that service providers – in this case academic staff – operate according to “official” and “unofficial” norms (see also Olivier de Sardan 2008) simultaneously, and they cherry-pick which ones they are guided by according to a variety of pressures, such as the external (outside the university) pressure to support kin, community or ethnicity on one hand, and the internal (inside the university) pressure to maintain the veneer of respectability on the other (for a similar argument see Erdmann and Engel 2007: 105). However, these individuals are aware of the motivations guiding each decision: In some circumstances, they may be guided by rational-legal norms and in others by patrimonial or financial ones; more likely, each decision is guided by a combination of the two. The key point is that these individuals are aware of which norm is guiding their behaviour. I would not go so far as to suggest, as Smith (2006: 13) does, that the two realms are “experienced as one reality”.

Students applying to USEN also experience two different but interpenetrating realms, as the case study of Emmanuel Adeniyi, discussed above, illustrates. Emmanuel failed to gain entry to USEN on the basis of his exam results (official realm), so he found a “saviour” to help him gain entry (unofficial realm). Throughout this process he was acutely aware of the relationship between the actions he took and the official rules: He had failed to gain entry on the basis of official rules and subsequently moved on to unofficial methods. These two realms therefore existed separately in Emmanuel’s mind during the process, and he used whichever was most appropriate to allow him to reach his goal – entry to USEN. This also illustrates the fact that his achievement of this goal was a combination of official achievements – a UME score of over 200 – and unofficial resources – a personal connection: The decision taken to admit him was on the basis of both these criteria.

This example, and arguments made in this article more generally, illustrate the complex relationship between official and unofficial realms in Nigerian higher education. It suggests a system in which personal connections and money are important but do not completely undermine the notion of merit as a criterion for success, and one in which the official rules and unofficial norms are constantly reforming and reconstituting one another rather than existing as wholly separate spheres.

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“Get to the bridge and I will help you to cross”: Leistung, persönliche Verbindungen und Geld und der Zugang zum Hochschulstudium in Nigeria

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Aufsatz untersucht, welche Möglichkeiten Studierende nutzen, um die Aufnahme an einer (bundes)staatlichen Eliteuniversität in Nigeria zu erreichen. Der Autor beschreibt das Verhältnis von drei unterschiedlichen Zugangs-, „Währungen“ – Leistung, persönliche Verbindungen und Geld –, die zu diesem Zweck eingesetzt werden. Er argumentiert, dass sich Zugangsmöglichkeiten nach offiziellen Regelungen, die vor allem auf Leistung beruhen, mit halb- oder inoffiziellen Wegen überschneiden, wie dem Einsatz von persönlichen Verbindungen und/oder

Geld. In dieser Interdependenz sieht er einen Ausdruck der Komplexität der Beziehung zwischen Staat und Gesellschaft im heutigen Nigeria. Seine Analyse deckt auf, dass in diesem Fall die hybride Interpretation des neopatrimonialen Staates, wonach offizielle und inoffizielle Normen parallel existieren und einander durchdringen, größeren analytischen Wert besitzt als ihr Gegenstück, die These von der umfassenden Privatisierung staatlicher Strukturen.

Schlagwörter: Nigeria, Hochschulstudium, Zugang zu Bildungseinrichtungen, Staat, Neopatrimonialismus