

Admission Age Policy and Universities Adherence in Nigeria

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Abstract: The entrance age for Nigerian undergraduates is governed by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and the National Universities Commission (NUC). It is required that students be 16 years old as of October of the year of admission. This is to guarantee that learners are adequately prepared intellectually, psychologically, and emotionally for the academic challenges they will face. This paper, therefore, presents an empirical study of universities adherence to admission age policy into universities within Osun State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population for this study comprised 8,464 admitted undergraduates for the 2021/2022 academic session of the two public universities in Osun State. Two research questions guided the study. The sample consisted of 382 undergraduate students from six faculties at Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, and Osun State University, using Yamane sample size formula. A researcher designed instrument titled “University Adherence to Admission Age Policy Questionnaire (UAAAP-Q)”, was used to elicit information from the respondents. Two research questions were raised and answered. Findings revealed that the university managements are not totally in adherence to the 16years stipulated age of admission by the regulatory body. The study concluded that admission regulatory body (JAMB & NUC) are to apportion penalty for the noncompliance to the admission policy on age on schools that violate the rules in order to increase the level of the schools’ adherence to the policy.

Keywords: Universities, Adherence, Admission Age, Regulatory Bodies

1. INTRODUCTION

Universally, it is a belief that the age at which a student enters school greatly influences their scholastic advancement. This is not in any way limited to basic schools but up to the university level. Perhaps the reason Hall et al. (2017) argue that the age of undergraduate students has an impact on their academic performance in higher education. College students are required to exhibit their ability to effectively tackle challenging subjects within limited timeframes, with various forms of academic pressure. Admission age pertains to the specific age when a student commences their university education, whereas intellectual readiness relates to the student's cognitive and academic competence at admission. Academic competence, however, pertains to the student's degree of accomplishment in academic endeavours. Lack of intellectual readiness resulting from social problems can hinder young students' ability to adapt to the higher academic system in universities. This can result in a lower level of academic competence compared to peers who entered university at a more advanced age. While this may seem hypothetical, it is necessary to empirically examine and analyse the relationship between those factors. Students who are intellectually ready for university generally exhibit superior academic competence. This underscores the utmost importance of ensuring that students possess the necessary intellectual readiness prior to commencing their university courses. Various interconnected and intricate factors, such as admission age, intellectual readiness, and academic competence, can impact a student's success in higher education. Aside from socioeconomic status, educational history, and personal drive, the age at which a student enters may also impact their level of readiness and competence.

The organisation and criteria employed for admission vary significantly among nations, exemplifying the substantial differences in admission techniques. Policy choices made at the institutional or governmental level shape admissions systems, closely linking them to the educational system and historical development. Consequently, admissions procedures might significantly differ even within different countries. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) utilizes either decentralised or centralised admission systems. In the United States, a decentralised admission system is in place, wherein each higher education institution has the authority to determine whether or not to admit a candidate. In

centralised systems, students have the ability to prioritise a specific number of possibilities. Admission in these systems is usually based on the programme itself, or a mix of the programme and the institution. The organisation responsible for centralised admissions often functions autonomously from institutions. The admission policies are enforced and overseen by regulatory authorities responsible for formulating these policies.

In Nigeria, the regulatory bodies responsible for admission are the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and the National Universities Commission (NUC). They ensure that every candidate meets the entrance requirements before granting admission. One of the prerequisites for admission in Nigeria is that candidates must be at least 16 years old by October of the admission year. The regulatory agencies (JAMB and NUC) impose a minimum age criterion of 16 years for admission into Nigerian universities, ensuring that students have reached a specific level of intellectual readiness and academic competence prior to enrolling in higher education (Akpan, 2014, Okoye & Duru, 2020). The age requirement serves the purpose of ensuring that students have completed their secondary education, which is typically the foundational level of education in numerous countries, including Nigeria.

Secondary education equips students with the necessary academic abilities and competencies in specific subjects, as well as a range of skills, to enable their advancement to higher education institutions. In addition, implementing a minimum age requirement is useful in guaranteeing that students have reached a fundamental level of maturity and capability to handle the challenges of higher education institutions. University courses necessitate learners to take on responsibilities for self-direction, tackle complex academic tasks, and engage more deeply in academic pursuits compared to secondary education. Universities set an age requirement to bring maturity into students by selecting and admitting only those individuals who are able to contend with the university workloads and demands. However, it should be noted that by this statement, we must admit that age cannot be the only criterion for determining intellectual readiness and academic competence, despite the tendency to typecast. Thus, the age requirement acts merely as a rough indication of whether the students are ready or not, regarding the topics in question.

Several elements, such as individual ability, motivation, previous learning experiences, and personal growth, influence intellectual readiness and academic competence. Consequently, universities generally evaluate various admission factors, such as academic achievement, entrance exams, and interviews, in order to gauge a student's overall readiness for higher education. Age at admission to university can determine individuals' intellectual readiness and academic competence, as indicated by the following indices: According to Delaney and Devereux (2020), an individual's academic performance when they enter university can be a reliable measure of their intellectual readiness and ability in school. The prerequisites may encompass a high school diploma, performance on standardised assessments (such as the WAEC, JAMB, SAT, or ACT), and other academic achievements. Meeting the required age and successfully fulfilling the academic requirements for university admission demonstrates a specific degree of intellectual readiness.

According to Nokkala and Bacevic, (2014), students are admitted into universities at certain age, which is a cognitive as well as the skills required for academic activities. Over the life span of individuals, the capabilities for the critical analysis of information, problem solving, and information processing are all enhanced. These enhanced capabilities can go a long way in boosting their academic competence and intellectual readiness. There is an opinion that the age of students in university corresponds to the level of their readiness to independent learning and self-study (Gill, 2016). Younger students may lack personal organization skills and may have less capacity regarding self-organization to navigate the self-managed academic tasks as well as optimize the usage of the Universities' resources.

Ultimately, although a prescribed minimum age of 16 years may function as a broad criterion for Nigerian university entrance, it is crucial to acknowledge that age in itself does not ensure intellectual readiness and academic competence. The correlation between the age of admission and these attributes is intricate and diverse. Learning readiness and academic achievement are thus a product of other factors like prior education, emotional development and the talents in any student. Reaching the secondary school at a certain age may indicate that the primary education has been completed, consequently, the need for the other necessities may not be met. Admission criteria are often complex in universities as the institution does not rely solely on one parameter but takes other variables into consideration in order to determine whether an applicant is ready to undertake university education. The above factors present

a better evaluation of intellectual readiness and academic competence than the mere aspect of age. It is important to consider the specified age for admission as a general guideline rather than an absolute factor.

Admissions committees thoroughly evaluate many signs of readiness to guarantee that accepted students have the intellectual readiness and academic competence required to excel in the university setting. Hence, although the specified minimum age for admission is 16 years, it is the amalgamation of multiple elements and signs that accurately demonstrates an applicant's readiness for advanced education. The issue of adhering to admission or entry ages is complex and deeply intertwined with societal discussions on education, social progress, and ethical deliberations. In order to thoroughly examine this subject, it is necessary to explore the current body of research while recognising the ever-changing nature of policies and regulations pertaining to age-based entry requirements. Research, such as the study conducted by Makransky, Andreasen, Baceviciute, & Mayer, (2021), indicates that postponing the start of kindergarten for children who are considered to be "younger" can result in enhanced academic performance and decreased emotional and behavioural problems in later years of schooling. In a similar vein, Yilmaz (2017) discovered that complying with the minimum age prerequisites for enrolling in early childhood education programmes promotes enhanced cognitive development and mitigates the likelihood of scholastic disadvantage.

Nevertheless, rigid adherence to age requirements can also give rise to worries regarding the exclusion and missed chances for children who exhibit advanced development despite being chronologically "younger." Furthermore, gaps in socioeconomic status can impact the availability of high-quality pre-school programmes, which may worsen existing inequalities (Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, & Curby, 2016). The minimum age for starting school varies considerably among countries, with a range of 4 to 7 years old (Haung et al, 2020). This underscores the intricacies of reconciling societal objectives and developmental factors across varied circumstances.

Strand and Freeman (2015), conducted a study in Norway to examine the enduring effects of early versus late school entry. By adolescence, early arrivals had eliminated the originally demonstrated inferior academic achievement. Also, the results revealed that latter joiners were likely to be absent and attained less education than those who joined in the early stages. However, these results prove that, in order to get the most optimal results, it is highly important to offer assistance to those who enroll at this stage and, at the same time, to provide early-phase learners with individualized help. It can also be argued that requirements regarding the certain age, may also be the cause of impact on the social and emotional developments of the children. Starting school early also has other disadvantages including difficulty in developing friendship with peers as well as managing own emotions (Taylor et al., 2015). On the other hand, if the youngsters are more developed than their peer group, they will feel left out and get bored if enrolled is delayed. Some negative aspects that are associated with the over-adherence to the age provision include fear of age discrimination.

Furthermore, the evaluation of children's readiness for particular settings gives rise to inquiries regarding subjectivity and prejudice (Broadbent, & Poon, 2015). The introduction of "readiness" evaluations that take into account individual development in addition to chronological age presents a promising method for making entry-age decisions (OECD, 2019). Current policy talks are underway to modify entry-age rules in order to accommodate a wide range of learning demands and foster inclusive educational environments (Ebzeeva & Smirnova, 2023).

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The entrance age for Nigerian undergraduate students is governed by the Joint Entrance and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and the National University Commission (NUC). It is required that students be 16 years old as of October of the year of admission. This is to guarantee that learners are adequately prepared intellectually, psychologically, and emotionally for the academic challenges they will face. Before being accepted into the university, it is assumed that a 16-year-old youngster should possess the necessary maturity to handle the academic challenges that lie ahead. Nonetheless, it is evident that the admission age policy for Nigerian universities is not so strictly complied with, and this has caused variation in the age of students joining various universities. This non-adherence to the policy introduces issues of equity in admissions as well as ability of students admitted to perform academically and accommodate themselves socio-culturally. Also, based on the admission age policy, one might lament that lack of enforcement thereof might worsen overcrowding and stress on university resources.

The current prevalent problem in the country is the increasing trend in the drop-out rate of university students. In respect to this, there are many students who drop out of school every year, and there are also cases where students in their undergraduate studies transfer from one department to another as a result of being unable to cope with the tasks in the disciplines of their choice on entry into the university. This study, therefore, highlights the need for a more rigorous implementation and monitoring of the admission age policy in Nigerian universities to ensure a level playing field for all students.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study's general aim was to assess universities adherence to admission age policy in universities within Osun State, Nigeria.

The specific objectives of this study were to:

- determine the prominent universities entrants' age in universities within Osun State, Nigeria; and,
- Examine level of adherence to admission age specified by the regulatory bodies in universities within Osun State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

- What is the prominent age of entrants' admission into universities within Osun State, Nigeria?
- What is the level of adherence of universities managements to the stipulated admission age by regulatory bodies?

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population for this study comprised 8,464 admitted undergraduates for the 2021/2022 academic session of the two public universities in Osun State.

Table 1. *New Entrants into Universities in Osun State*

| Institution | Numbers of Students |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife | 5,547 |
| Osun State University | 2,915 |
| Total | 8,462 |

Source: *OAU and UNIOSUN Admission Offices, 2021/2022 Session*

The sample consisted of 382 undergraduate students from six faculties at Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, and Osun State University. The Yamane sample size formula was used to determine the sample size. Three faculties were randomly selected from each of the two chosen universities using the simple random sampling technique. A convenience sample technique was employed to choose 64 students from each of the four faculties (Education, Arts, Social Sciences and Science) and 63 students from the remaining two faculties (Health Sciences and Administration), resulting in a total of 382 undergraduates in order to ensure adequate representation for the study. The researcher designed an instrument titled "University Adherence to Admission Age Policy Questionnaire (UAAAP-Q)", to elicit information from the respondents. The UAAAP-Q has two sections. The first section contained demographic information of respondents while the second section has five items which are used to elicit questions on the level of the universities' adherence to the stipulated admission age in Osun State, Nigeria.

Validity of the instrument was ensured by subjecting it to face and content validity via presentation of the instrument to experts in a bid to ensure its quality. The instrument was subjected to a pilot study. Data obtained were tested using Split-half reliability procedure and analysed with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 24). Correlation Coefficient obtained was 0.73 and was confirmed reliable and usable for the study. Data was collected through the self-administered instrument. The respondents filled the questionnaires as the researcher was distributing for 2021/2022 academic session fresh university undergraduates across Osun State individually. Collection of data lasted for three weeks and every instrument given out was retrieved thereby enabling 100% return rate. The whole were considered useful for further analysis. The questions were answered using percentage.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Research Question 1: What is the age at which the students got admitted into the universities? To answer this question, respondents' responses were calculated and subjected to analysis. The results are as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Age at which the respondent got admitted in to university

| At what age did you gain admission? | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Age 13 | 7 | 1.83 |
| Age 14 | 101 | 26.44 |
| Age 15 | 76 | 19.90 |
| Age 16 | 46 | 12.04 |
| Age 17 | 80 | 20.94 |
| Age 18 | 29 | 7.59 |
| Age 19 | 15 | 3.93 |
| Age 20 | 10 | 2.62 |
| Age 21 | 5 | 1.31 |
| Age 22 | 9 | 2.36 |
| Age 25 | 4 | 1.05 |
| Total | 382 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The Table presents the age distribution at which the respondents were admitted. This is aimed at providing insights into the deviation from or adherence to the mandated age of 16years set by higher education governing bodies. From the analysis, the frequencies and percentage shows that individuals below the legally required age (184) accounted for 48.1% of the respondents that were offered admissions to study in the universities. Whereas, those respondents who are of the required age (198) accounted for (51.9%). Findings from the study as shown in the Table indicates that not all admissions conform to the specified age requirements as stated by the NUC and JAMB.

In summary, the data shows a diverse range of entrance ages, which includes both compliance with and divergence from the standard age requirement of 16. There are both early and late admissions, which means we need to fully understand the factors that affect both trends. This could mean that current regulatory frameworks need to be reevaluated to accommodate this range.

5.2. Research Question 2

What is the level of adherence of universities managements to the stipulated admission age by regulatory bodies? To answer this question, respondents' responses were calculated and subjected to analysis. The results are as presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Level of the university management adherence to admission age policy

| Items | Yes | No |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| I met the age requirement when applied for admission | 268(70.15%) | 114(29.85%) |
| I was asked to provide any documents or proof of age during the application. | 324(84.22%) | 58(15.18%) |
| The university verified my age before I was admitted | 339(88.74%) | 43(11.26 %) |
| I had come across instances where students were admitted despite not meeting the specified age | 320(83.77%) | 62(16.23%) |
| I was given admission via my birth certificate | 286(74.86%) | 96(25.14%) |

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The given data provide insights into the compliance with admission age criteria among the respondents who applied to universities for admission. Out of the respondents, a substantial majority (70.15%) assert that they fulfilled the age prerequisite during the entrance application process. This indicates a broad understanding of and compliance with the prescribed age requirements throughout the application procedure. The data shows a high level of adherence to the necessity of submitting documents or evidence of age throughout the application procedure, as 84.22% of respondents confirmed their compliance. This demonstrates a diligent approach to meeting the required criteria for admission. The Table shows that 88.74% of the respondents indicate that the university confirmed their age prior to enrollment. The university's high percentage demonstrates a meticulous and methodical approach to verifying that applicants satisfy the designated age requirements. Remarkably, 83.77% of the respondents revealed that they have come across cases whereby students were admitted despite failing to meet the stipulated age requirements. These lead to questions regarding the homogeneity and enforcement of admission criteria concerning age in the universities. According to the survey, the 74.86% affirms that they were able to get admission through birth certificates. Although this implies a widespread and acknowledged procedure, the fact that 25.14% of individuals did not use their birth

certificates for admission reveals diversity in the approved forms of documentations. In summary, the data presents a varied perspective on compliance with entrance age criteria. While many respondents claimed to having met the age criterion and having gone through the age verification exercise with the university, then cases of students who are accepted despite not meeting age requirements are apparent. The most common documentation used is birth certificates suggests that there is consistency in the admission process, however, other forms of acceptance are available which indicates that there is flexibility regarding documentation. These outcomes prompted further research on the causes that lead to cases of noncompliance with age criteria, the method of confirmation of the represented age, and the possible repercussions of such deviations for the admission process and overall climate of the university.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study found that the university managements are not totally in adherence to the 16years stipulated age of admission by the regulatory body. Though they are accessible to the undergraduates' birth certificate and are aware of their age as at the time of admission, the level of adherence of the universities' management to the admission policy on age of entrants into the university is not as high as expected. This finding is in contrast with the study of Yilmaz (2017) which discovered that complying with the minimum age prerequisites for enrolling in to educational programmes promotes enhanced cognitive development and mitigates the likelihood of scholastic disadvantage. Supporting this is also the study of Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, & Curby, (2016) who discovered that rigid adherence to age requirements can also give rise to worries regarding the exclusion and missed chances for children who exhibit advanced development despite being chronologically "younger." This underscores the intricacies of reconciling societal objectives and developmental factors across varied circumstances in which the learners are expected to mature cognitively and affectionately. Hence the strict adherence to specific age requirements might also have an impact on the social and emotional development of aspiring candidates, bearing in mind the submission of Delaney and Devereux (2020) that an individual's academic performance when they enter university can be a reliable measure of their intellectual readiness and ability in school.

7. CONCLUSION

The investigation into the admission policy regarding age, as mandated by regulatory bodies and universities, yielded valuable insights into the intricacies of the educational environment of universities in Osun State. The lack of consistent adherence to the admission age policy in Nigerian universities presents substantial obstacles to the equity and efficiency of the admission process. The non-compliance with this policy not only gives rise to concerns regarding fairness and educational achievement, but also adds to the problem of overcrowding and resource burden in institutions. Universities in Nigeria must prioritise the implementation and monitoring of the admission age policy to guarantee fairness for all students and foster an optimal learning environment. By tackling this matter, universities can improve the calibre and authenticity of their academic programmes and provide stronger assistance for the achievement and welfare of their students. This conclusion summarises important discoveries, highlights the university management's failure to comply with the admission age policy in Osun State universities, explores the complex connection between admission age and the intellectual preparedness of university undergraduates in Osun State, and contemplates the significant impact of admission age on the academic proficiency of university undergraduates in Osun State.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the followings are recommended:

- The admission regulatory body (JAMB & NUC) are to apportion penalty for the noncompliance to the admission policy on age on schools that violate the rules in order to increase the level of the schools adherence to the policy.
- Grade skipping should be avoided by parents as this is a great factor that contributed to students' early graduation from the high school as learners who followed the stages of learning religiously are not expected to have left high school earlier than 16year of age.
- The admission regulatory bodies should also increase the policy on admission age by one or two years in order for the students to be more mature and experienced at home before they embark on their journey to the universities.

- The universities management are to adhere strictly to the policy on admission age since they have means of verifying the applicants' age in order to help the learners become the better version of the.

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sustainable educational development.

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