

# Admission criteria and graduate quality in Nigeria

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## Abstract

The reason for Nigeria's graduate unemployment rate is that the quality of education offered to graduates in Nigerian universities is questionable and insufficient to fulfill the expectations of contemporary employment. This study investigated the composite contribution of the four admission criteria, as well as the relative contribution of catchment area, merit, quota, and educationally less developed state criteria to the quality of Nigerian graduates. The study adopted a correlational approach with a population of all undergraduates across the public universities in Nigeria. An instrument titled 'Admission Criteria and Graduate Quality Questionnaire' was used to elicit response from the respondents using a stratified purposeful and simple random technique to select two universities and 800 participants each from the 400 level students at Zaria and Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The universities are among the first-generation universities located in the northern and southern parts of the country. The study found a significant composite contribution of the four government admission criteria to graduate quality. In addition, merit, quota and, catchment criteria have relatively significant contributions with merit having the biggest contribution whereas the lowest and least relative significant contribution was made by Education Less Disadvantage States. The study excluded other public universities outside the first-generation ones, as well as private universities within a defined time frame and geographic context. Future research could incorporate empirical investigations on the variables of the study in universities outside the first-generation and private institutions.

**Keywords:** *government admission criteria, graduate quality, public universities, university education*

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## 1. Introduction

All over the world, customer satisfaction, company reputation, and long-term profitability depend on quality. In a competitive market, a company's commitment to excellence can set it apart, allowing it to command higher prices and attract more clients. According to Boateng (2014), in the academic community, qualities are declarations that outline the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities that every student should possess. Hence, the quality of university graduates is essential for economic progress, societal advancement, and personal prosperity.

Graduate quality refers to the abilities, knowledge, and character traits that university graduates should acquire after completing their degree programs. The abilities, knowledge, and qualities that a student should acquire throughout their time in the university and possess upon graduation are also known as graduate quality (Pentang et al., 2024). Graduates with excellent communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities can improve living standards, spur innovation, and address societal issues. Adebakin et al. (2015) state that graduates with excellent attributes and high quality can boost economic productivity, entrepreneurship, and innovation, which will increase the wealth and prosperity of a nation. Maintaining and sustaining the production of quality graduates requires the complementary efforts of training universities and regulatory institutions that oversee and monitor activities in universities.

Across the world, there are bodies responsible for regulating the establishment, accreditation, and admission criteria of universities. In the United States of America, an all-encompassing "university regulatory agency" does not exist. Instead, supervision is dispersed among several federal and state organizations. Certain aspects of higher education are governed by federal and state regulations, while accredited institutions manage accreditation. The primary regulatory agency for universities in South Africa is the Council on Higher Education (CHE). Furthermore, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) plays a vital role in the registration and supervision of both public and private universities. To regulate university admissions in Egypt, the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE) serves as the primary regulatory organization. The National Universities Commission (NUC) is Nigeria's primary university regulatory body. The NUC is responsible for various regulatory duties, such as authorizing academic programs, establishing new universities, ensuring quality control, and promoting the general regulation of university admissions in Nigeria. Additionally, the NUC works to ensure that university

graduates meet the country's manpower needs, prevent the establishment of substandard institutions, and encourage innovation and research in universities.

According to Okeke and Ajadi (2025), the demand for university education in Nigeria has skyrocketed in recent years. This supports Orji (2024), who posited that Nigeria has made great strides in producing many university graduates over the past thirty years. Despite these improvements, finding employment remains extremely difficult for Nigerian graduates due to the quality of graduates produced. Orji (2024) claims that one of the main causes of this problem is the use of outdated educational curricula, which prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical skills, making it more difficult for Nigerian graduates to secure employment in the contemporary labor market.

Many concerns have been raised about the caliber of Nigerian university graduates, with reports suggesting a decline in quality and general employability. According to Aririah (2014), the majority of Nigerian graduates lack the necessary qualities to secure employment after graduation, rendering them unemployable. Therefore, graduates from Nigerian universities may be unable to obtain employment in any firm without possessing the necessary employable qualities. Adekola et al. (2016) concluded that while China and the United States have stable graduate unemployment rates as their populations grow, population growth alone is not responsible for Nigeria's rising graduate unemployment rate. Accordingly, the situation in Nigeria is quite the opposite, as population growth coincides with a decline in graduate quality. Onoyase (2019) found that the mismatch between graduate qualities and the competencies needed in the modern workplace is a major contributing factor to graduate unemployment.

Applicants for admission to universities in Nigeria must first meet the basic requirements before consideration under other criteria. These basic requirements include obtaining a minimum of five credits in relevant subjects from examinations conducted by the West African Examination Council, the National Examination Council, or the National Board for Technical Education. Applicants must be at least 16 years old and must also pass the entrance examination conducted by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board. The government, in consultation with all universities, sets the minimum pass mark for candidates to be considered for admission each year. After this decision, each university may set its own minimum pass mark due to university autonomy and varying standards. However, no university is allowed to set a cut-off below the pass mark agreed upon by the government in

conjunction with the vice-chancellors of all Nigerian universities. In addition to the basic requirements, applicants who meet these standards may be considered for admission to any of Nigeria's federal universities based on four other criteria: merit, quota, catchment, and Educationally Less Developed States (ELDS), all of which can impact graduate quality. Applicants who do not meet the basic requirements are not considered at this stage. Consideration is given to applicants across various federal government-owned universities, regardless of location, using the criteria set by the government through the regulatory body in charge of university education.

The efforts of the Federal Government of Nigeria to make university education accessible to all in the country's pluralistic society are commendable and yielding results. Many undergraduates gain admission to universities through merit, catchment, quota, and ELDS criteria. However, concerns persist regarding graduate quality, particularly in relation to the merit, quota, catchment, and ELDS criteria, aside from the general basic requirements. Many graduates have found it difficult to secure employment over the years, resulting in an increase in graduate unemployment in Nigeria (Atte & Imam, 2024). This issue must be urgently addressed to improve graduate employability in the country. Consequently, this study investigated the relative and composite contributions of the four admission criteria to university graduate quality in Nigeria. The study is set out to address the following objectives:

To examine the composite contribution of government admission criteria to graduate quality in Nigeria.

To determine the relative contribution of government admission criteria to graduate quality in Nigeria.

The following hypotheses are formulated and tested in this study

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant composite contribution of government admission criteria to graduate quality in Nigeria.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant relative contribution of government admission criteria to graduate quality in Nigeria.

## 2. Literature Review

## *2.1. Graduate Qualities*

The history of graduate qualities can be traced back to the early 1970s when the concept was first introduced by examining general competencies and skills in Australia, the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States of America (Besta, 2014). For example, in Australia, the development of essential competencies was considered the most direct and beneficial employment solution for the future. As a result, most Australian universities created graduate quality charters, which have now become a mainstay of their higher education system. According to Rigby (2019), these charters are frequently founded on a broad conceptualization of generic skills in Australian universities, encompassing a wide range of elements such as skills, attitudes, values, dispositions, capabilities, and competencies. Similar to other nations, Nigeria also agrees with the notion that producing high-quality graduates is one of the key tools for economic development and empowerment (Ikutal et al., 2023).

Over time, issues surrounding the qualities of graduates have become a frequent topic of discussion (Green et al., 2009). However, despite further refinement, the concept appeared to lack clear conceptual meaning. This notion is supported by Kew (2014), who argues that while there is disagreement over the definition of the term, there is also contention regarding which specific graduate qualities universities should aim to instill in their students. The term has been interpreted differently by several authors (Leggett et al., 2004; Treleaven & Voola, 2008; Barrie, 2012; Bester, 2014; Mager & Spronken-Smith, 2014; Su, 2014; Spronken-Smith et al., 2015; Mashiyyi, 2015; Bitzer & Withering, 2020), providing varying descriptions that include employability skills, generic skills, transferable skills, and more. However, determining how and when such qualities are developed remains a challenging task.

According to Hill et al. (2016), advanced characteristics, abilities, and understanding that a student should acquire as a result of their university education and experiences are referred to as graduate qualities. Meanwhile, Bitzer and Withering (2020) explain that graduate qualities are the traits, abilities, and knowledge that the university community believes its students should acquire while attending the institution. These qualities include, but are not limited to, the technical knowledge or disciplinary expertise that has historically served as the foundation for most university courses. According to Tabinda et al. (2023), graduate qualities encompass the abilities, knowledge, and skills that graduates possess beyond discipline-specific content knowledge, enabling them to apply these in a variety of contexts throughout

their lives. Graduate qualities are therefore the traits and abilities that institutions expect their students to acquire as a result of their academic experiences.

Bridgstock (2009) observed that in an information-intensive and rapidly changing economy, individuals need to be immediately and sustainably employable. To achieve this, they must possess “generic” abilities, attitudes, and qualities that are applicable to a wide range of occupational contexts, in addition to maintaining and developing knowledge and skills specific to their field or occupation. Mayor (1992, as cited in Boateng & Eghan, 2015) identified generic talents as underpinning qualities essential for employment, transferable skills or core competencies. According to Faller et al. (2023) and Senekal et al. (2024), graduate qualities represent a combined set of cognitive, skill-based, and personal attributes that students acquire through both formal education and informal learning processes. These traits enable graduates to make significant and flexible contributions to their academic and professional fields after graduation, in addition to providing measurable outcomes.

From the various definitions presented, it can be concluded that the qualities a university expects its graduates to possess, though not always explicitly included in the formal curriculum, are referred to as graduate qualities.

## ***2.2. Admission Criteria***

According to Kang et al. (2024), the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research UAE (2024), and Kiwelu et al. (2025), higher education institutions use admission criteria, which are an integrated set of academic standards, non-academic characteristics, and institution- or policy-specific requirements such as prior qualifications, subject grades, language proficiency, competencies, and personal traits, to select students. By admitting applicants who are most likely to succeed and make significant contributions in their disciplines, these requirements aim to improve graduate quality while ensuring equity and alignment with institutional goals.

Admission criteria serve as a vehicle through which students are admitted into any public university in Nigeria (Fabian, 2020). These criteria include merit, quota, catchment, and ELDS. There are four criteria in various proportions used to determine university admission in Nigeria (Joshua et al., 2014). Twenty percent goes to the catchment area, 40% to merit, 30% to quota, and 10% to people from ELDS. Due to the rising demand for university education, despite the fact that Nigerian law does not mandate it, admissions to Nigerian universities have

become increasingly challenging over time. Before 1978, each university administered its own placement examination and admitted students based on space availability. Nwadiani and Igineweka (2005) noted that the Federal Government of Nigeria established a central placement examination body after recognizing that, despite being accepted into multiple universities, highly talented applicants only chose one. By Decree No. 2 of 1978, the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) was created to take over placement examinations into the country's existing universities.

In addition, the Federal Government of Nigeria established and supported major admissions criteria (merit, catchment area, quota system, and ELDS) to promote equity and accessibility in university education. These criteria are considered during the admission exercise in public universities. According to Omeje et al. (2016), policies related to these criteria are crucial, especially in a pluralistic country like Nigeria. Universities are required to admit students based on the government-specified quota, catchment, and ELDS of the states rather than solely on merit because of government admission criteria and laws. By implementing different criteria for admission into public universities across the nation, the FGN offers all Nigerian citizens the opportunity to pursue university education without facing any form of prejudice in any part of the country. Those admitted under these considerations are not inherently unqualified; rather, they must fulfill the minimum requirements. However, universality is the key factor in admitting them under governments that apply criteria other than merit. This approach aims to promote equity in the admissions processes for public universities.

The merit list, sometimes referred to as the first batch, is typically the first list released when a university begins its admission exercise. In a nutshell, it is a list of students who scored high marks in the entrance examination and met other requirements for admission (Nnajiolor, 2024). Regardless of one's place of residence or state of origin, there is a significant probability that a candidate's name will appear on the merit list of their chosen university if they obtained excellent grades in the O-level, Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), and post-UTME screening. This method entails a thorough evaluation process conducted by individuals with specialized knowledge and expertise, emphasizing academic excellence alongside other abilities and skills.

According to Nigeria's university admissions policy, a catchment area implies that certain geographic regions are given preference in admissions. This strategy is part of the larger

federal character approach, which seeks to guarantee regional participation in federal institutions. In essence, even if their scores are comparable or slightly lower, students from states or regions close to a specific university may have a somewhat higher probability of admission than those from farther away. The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2011) defined a catchment area as the physical and/or socio-cultural regions surrounding the institution to which applicants are applying. According to Omeje et al. (2016), under the catchment area policy, locals should be given preference over non-residents in university admissions. Fabian (2020) stated that catchment areas are, by definition, the geographic regions that an institution serves. According to this criterion, a specific proportion of admission slots must be reserved for local residents of the regions where universities are situated. The disparity in location between Nigeria's several geopolitical zones has contributed to challenges in accessing university education. One strategy to address the disparity in the locations of federal universities is the catchment policy. Although catchment areas are given special consideration, this does not imply that candidates from outside the area will not be admitted.

To prevent allocating all admission slots to residents of a specific area where the university is located and to reduce educational disparities across various states, the quota system allots a specific percentage of university admissions to candidates based on their state of origin. According to Musari (2016), the quota admission policy is observed in universities worldwide, hence quotas for international students. Daniel (2022) also stated that the quota admission policy is not unique to Nigeria; it is also used in Brazil, India, and Kenya as one of their policy interventions to support fair access to quality educational opportunities. Under the quota policy, Adeyemi (2001), Sandikonda (2013), and Daniel (2022) explain that students are divided into groups according to factors such as gender, locality, or family socio-economic status. To ensure that students from underprivileged groups are considered, the available admission opportunities are proportionately divided among the target groups using a predetermined number of candidates to be selected from each group. Alongside merit-based admission, this strategy gives ELDS preferential treatment. The quota criterion in university admission is a form of selection for university placement in which a specific percentage of individuals chosen must belong to a particular state, sex, ethnic, or racial background (Obielumani, 2008).

In Nigeria, university admissions criteria also take into account ELDS. According to The Law Press Organisation (2017), states that are considered to have fewer graduates are

classified as educationally less developed states. ELDS criterion reserves a certain proportion of admission slots for states identified as being backward or educationally disadvantaged (Orike, 2019). Therefore, candidates from ELDS are given lower-standard marking systems in accordance with the federal character concept, which aims to guarantee equality in the distribution of higher education across the nation. To avoid lopsidedness in university admissions, Musari (2016) noted that the Federal Government of Nigeria established this policy more than 35 years ago to provide preference to applicants from states deemed to have less developed educational systems when applying to public universities nationwide, thereby ensuring the balanced growth of the nation's educational system. This group includes the majority of northern states, as well as a few from the South-South and Southeast that struggle with access, quality, and educational resources. Typically, indicators such as lower literacy levels, higher rates of out-of-school children, and lower enrollment rates are used to identify these states.

### ***2.3. Influence of Admission Policies on Graduate Quality***

While non-cognitive criteria, such as interviews and personal characteristics, typically have weaker predictive power unless combined with cognitive measures to provide a more comprehensive evaluation, studies by Kumke et al. (2024) and Banal et al. (2024) indicate that cognitive admission criteria, such as prior grades, standardized test scores, and academic achievements, are consistently strong predictors of student performance and graduate quality. Research on the connection between merit-based admissions and the caliber of university graduates is still ongoing. By admitting students with stronger academic foundations and higher success potential, merit-based admissions, where students are selected based on academic accomplishments and related factors, typically aim to enhance the caliber of university graduates. However, the relationship is complex and not always clear-cut. According to studies by Orike (2015) and Gbesoevic (2021), merit-based admission practices that prioritize academic performance and potential can positively influence graduate quality. Nonetheless, several studies point out that if merit-based systems are not implemented judiciously, they may exacerbate existing disparities. Obono (2022), in a study on merit-based admission and graduate quality in public universities, found that merit-based admission significantly contributes to university graduate quality in Cross River State.

In a study on the correlation between Saudi university students' admission grades and their academic achievement, Sulphrey et al. (2018) discovered a strong relationship between the quality of graduates and their admission grades in Saudi universities. Merit requirements in need-based student aid may worsen inequality in higher education, but they also enhance graduate quality and timely graduation, according to a related study by Minaya et al. (2022) on the intersection of need and merit in Italian public universities. According to Mohamad et al. (2019), a select group of students who perform exceptionally well in the Indonesian National Science Olympiad are admitted to Indonesian public universities through special admission criteria. Merit-based admission, also known as the Undangan method, is another option. The third method, used after all candidates have been admitted based on Olympiad and merit, involves test-based admission for those who did not meet the requirements for admission through the first two criteria. It was further noted that applicants accepted into Indonesian public universities based on merit performed better than those admitted through the National Science Olympiad and test-based procedures.

The diversity of the student body and the overall quality of graduates may be influenced by the university admissions catchment area criterion. These policies occasionally result in students being admitted based more on their geographic location than on their qualifications, which may affect their academic performance and the quality of graduates. In a study conducted by Omeje et al. (2016) on the effects of the catchment area criterion and quota system on university admissions in North Central Nigeria, the study found that the catchment area negatively impacted graduate quality in universities in the study area. In a related study by Agbaire and Dunne (2024) on exclusions and the lack of ethnicity in Nigeria's higher education catchment criterion, it was found that the catchment criterion is not related to graduate quality. The justification for the catchment criterion is to provide host communities with a sense of belonging while maintaining academic standards. The findings of Bello-Imam and Nyemutu-Roberts (2023) revealed that one of the key issues linked to the application of the catchment area criterion as a guideline for student admissions is its impact on graduate quality. Fajaryati et al. (2020) concluded that by influencing university admissions through catchment criteria, it becomes extremely difficult to admit the most qualified students. Consequently, there are challenges in teaching and assessment methods that directly affect the quality of educational outcomes.

Adebimpe et al. (2021) found that there is no correlation between graduate quality and the catchment criterion. This is because all admitted students receive instruction from the same lecturers in the same classrooms with identical resources. They all take the same examinations at the end of each semester to assess their preparedness for graduation or progression. Only those who fulfill the university's requirements, regardless of their admission category, are eligible to graduate. According to university standards, graduates are considered high-quality products of the nation's institutions. A related study by Tyokyaa and Pinga (2024) also concluded that graduate quality is not determined by the catchment area policy. When evaluating the caliber of the university and its graduates, quality is a relative concept. Regardless of entry waivers due to a university's location, all university graduates must meet academic standards to maintain quality. In addition, Tyokyaa and Pinga (2024) found that the catchment area criterion has a significantly positive influence on student quality in public universities in North Central Nigeria. This indicates that the policy provides opportunities for candidates from minority and educationally less developed areas to improve their educational attainment. However, Akpakwu (2017) found that the catchment area strategy has a detrimental effect on graduate quality since those admitted under this policy often depend on dishonest politicians and administrators to influence their admission and, consequently, their academic performance.

In Nigeria's educational system, the quota system has a complex and often conflicting impact on educational quality. Although it seeks to correct historical inequities and promote equitable educational opportunities, it is criticized for potentially lowering academic standards and undermining merit-based systems. According to Ebuta et al. (2024), a system that promotes high-quality education cannot rely on the quota system for university admissions, as the system is not based on academic merit. As a result, Nigeria's quota-based admissions address the symptoms rather than the root causes of inequality; in attempting to correct one anomaly, another arises that threatens educational quality. Omeje et al. (2016, as cited in Ebuta et al., 2024) found that the university quota system perpetuates inequity, lowering instructional quality and, in some cases, producing graduates who are inadequately prepared. The study by Tyokyaa and Pinga (2024) demonstrated that the quota system in public universities in North Central Nigeria had no significant positive impact on graduate quality. The findings indicate that the quota system policy prioritizes social considerations among different ethnic groups over academic quality. In a related study by Akani (1996, cited in Nwenaariz et al., 2018),

quota rules led to the lowering of admission requirements, allowing underqualified applicants to gain university entry, which negatively affected graduate quality. Atte and Imam (2024) also found that graduate quality is not influenced by the quota system because it subverts meritocracy by considering factors other than academic achievement.

Although Nigeria's ELDS criterion is intended to reduce disparities, it may inadvertently affect graduate quality. Research on ELDS and their impact on graduate quality often focuses on the effectiveness of programs designed to address disparities in access and outcomes. These studies commonly highlight the challenges of balancing quality and equality in higher education and the possibility that well-intentioned initiatives may have unintended consequences. Even with increased access, Orike (2019) found that ELDS policies create a quality gap, suggesting that students might not graduate with the skills and knowledge required for national development. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Atte and Imam (2024) on the effect of Nigeria's ELDS system on university admissions, it was found that, compared to their peers, the academic performance of candidates from ELDS, measured by the rate of improvement among indigenous candidates, was as low as 17%, even though their enrollment rate rose to 36%. This aligns with Asade (2019, as cited in Atte & Imam, 2024), who noted that only five northern universities were included in the top fifty universities on the NUC's annual ranking of best-performing institutions. The poor quality of graduates contributes to the absence of many universities in the northern part of the country, primarily classified as ELDS, from the top-ranked universities listed by the NUC.

#### ***2.4. Theoretical Framework***

This study was elucidated using Professor Martin Trow's Stage Theory of Higher Education Development. According to Scott (2019), the theorist explained that the shift in higher education from elite to mass to universal student access is described by this theory. Professor Martin Trow emphasized that the transition from elite to mass education involves not only a substantial increase in the number of individuals who can pursue higher education but also a transformation in quality, which is a key factor in this shift. The term quality refers to the evolution of the concept of education, the expansion of its functions, the diversification of educational forms and objectives, and changes in curriculum, teaching methods, admission criteria, and administration. The theory is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where there is a

pressing need to focus on graduate quality to reduce graduate unemployment and underemployment.

Professor Martin Trow's Theory of Higher Education Development provides a useful framework for examining how admission requirements affect graduate quality in Nigeria. Nigeria's efforts to expand enrollment through government initiatives reflect Trow's notion of the transition from elite to mass and ultimately to universal access. However, the theory also underscores the tension between maintaining academic standards and promoting broader access, an issue evident in concerns about graduate quality and student preparedness. Therefore, this theory is highly relevant to the analysis of admission practices and outcomes in Nigerian higher education.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

The study used a correlational research design. Its focus on determining the statistical relationship between two or more variables without manipulating them classifies it as a quantitative design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach was selected because it enables the examination of the degree and direction of the relationship between graduate quality and admission criteria (such as cut-off marks and entry requirements) without altering the variables. This design is appropriate since graduate outcomes and admission processes naturally occur within the educational system, allowing their interactions to be analyzed in real-world settings. Additionally, it provides predictive insights regarding the potential of admission requirements as indicators of graduate quality. Importantly, the correlational design offers a practical and ethical method for producing meaningful results, as experimentally manipulating admission procedures would be both unethical and impractical.

#### ***3.2. Participants of the Study***

The participants in this study comprised 1,600 graduating students randomly selected from two universities in Zaria and Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The two universities were purposively selected because they were both established in 1962 and are located in the northern and southern regions of Nigeria, respectively, among the five first-generation universities in the country. Since the respondents were in their final year, they were expected to have an adequate

understanding of graduate qualities. Eight hundred respondents were chosen from each university using simple random sampling techniques through a disproportional sampling method. This approach was used because the researcher selected an equal number of students from both universities regardless of their enrollment size or total population.

### ***3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process***

A researcher-designed questionnaire titled ‘Admission Criteria and Graduate Quality Questionnaire (ACGQQ)’ served as the primary instrument for data collection. The instrument used response options of Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD) for items related to merit, quota, catchment, and ELDS policies. For graduate quality items, the response options ranged from Very High (VH) to Very Low (VL).

Construct and internal validity were considered to ensure credible results. Construct validity enhances credibility by confirming that graduate quality and admission requirements are properly defined and measured in ways that accurately represent these constructs (Creswell, 2012). Although correlational designs have limitations, internal validity was addressed by identifying and controlling potential confounding variables, such as students’ backgrounds or institutional resources, which could otherwise bias the observed relationships (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Two quality assurance officials from the universities and a test and measurement specialist validated the questionnaire.

To assess the reliability of the instrument, thirty graduating students from a university within the population, but not part of the sample, participated in a pilot study. The data collected were analyzed using Cronbach’s alpha, yielding reliability coefficients of .91 for the independent variable (admission criteria) and .87 for the dependent variable (graduate quality). These results indicate that the questionnaire covered all relevant aspects of graduate quality and admission criteria while avoiding redundant information. This aligns with Creswell and Creswell (2018), who asserted that by employing appropriate statistical methods, using adequate sample sizes, and minimizing errors, statistical conclusion validity is maintained, ensuring the reliability and validity of the observed relationship between graduate quality and admission requirements.

### ***3.4. Data Analysis***

ANOVA and multiple regression analyses were used as inferential statistical tools to examine the data and test the composite and relative contributions of the independent variables to the dependent variable.

### ***3.5. Research Ethics***

Ethical clearance was obtained from the management of the two selected universities prior to the administration of the instrument. The researcher explained to the respondents that participation was voluntary and not compulsory in any form. Respondents were encouraged to provide honest responses, and they were assured that the information collected would be used solely for research purposes. Therefore, there was no need to include names or any identifying information on the questionnaire. Respondents were also informed that they could withdraw from participation at any point if they felt uncomfortable. This aligns with Hadjer et al. (2023), who emphasized that researchers and scientists must always adhere to established ethical guidelines when collecting data from human participants.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### ***4.1. Test of Hypotheses***

Ho<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant composite contribution of government admission criteria to graduate quality in Nigeria

**Table 1**

*Multiple regression of graduate quality on the four government admission criteria*

<b>R</b>	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Adjusted R Square</b>	<b>Std. Error of the Estimate</b>
0.431	0.186	0.183	10.6231

From Table 1, the four government admission criteria viz: merit, catchment, quota, and ELDS criteria, taken together jointly contribute positively (R=.431) to graduate quality. This implies that the four admission criteria when taken together have a positive multiple contribution to graduate quality. Hence, they have the potential to explain the graduate quality to a large extent. Also, the four criteria could explain 18.6% of the total variance in graduate quality (R<sup>2</sup>=.186). This leaves the remaining 81.4% to other factors and residuals.

The level of the composite contribution is predicted in Table 2. The ANOVA shows that the R value of .431 is significant ( $F=72.756$ ;  $P < .05$ ). This implies that the R value of .431 is not due to chance. Hence, hypothesis 1 is rejected.

**Table 2**

*ANOVA of the regression analysis*

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	41053.107	5	8210.621	72.756	.000*
Residual	179884.64	1594	112.851		
Total	220937.75	1599			

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant relative contribution of government admission criteria to graduate quality in Nigeria

**Table 3**

*Relative contribution of the government admission criteria on graduate quality*

Delivery Modes	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Rank	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	-4.745	3.233			-1.468	.142
Catchment	.254	.045	.248	3 <sup>rd</sup>	5.605	.000
ELDS	-3.070	.031	.024	4 <sup>th</sup>	-.981	*.327
Quota	.02	.187	.261	2 <sup>nd</sup>	-6.033	.000
Merit	-1.130	.160	.289	1 <sup>st</sup>	12.648	.000
	2.021					

\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 3 shows that the merit criterion made the highest contribution to graduate quality ( $\beta=.289$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). This contribution is significant. It is followed by the contribution of the quota criterion ( $\beta=.261$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), and then catchment ( $\beta=.248$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) which also made significant contributions and ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> respectively. The fourth and the lowest in the magnitude contributions is made by ELDS ( $\beta=.024$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) which is not significant. Hence, hypothesis 2 is rejected for merit, quota and catchment but not rejected for ELDS.

The results also show that there are some favorable correlations between graduate quality and the four admissions processes chosen for this study. This is in support of Fabian (2020), who claims that admission criteria serve as a vehicle for admission into Nigerian public universities, and these are the criteria that are considered for admission into Nigerian public universities. It is also consistent with the findings of Omeje et al. (2016), who stated that policies concerning admission requirements are essential, particularly in a multicultural nation such as Nigeria. Citizens have the opportunity to receive a university education without facing any discrimination when the government's entrance criteria are followed.

It should come as no surprise that the merit admission criterion contributed the most to the caliber of graduates from the findings of hypothesis 2. This could be because the criteria are based on the abilities of the students. Additionally, the government gives this more attention by giving it the largest share of admissions percentage. Students were encouraged to study more diligently by this criterion, which required them to review multiple sources prior to examinations. Regarding matters that may impact their education, students can also speak with their academic advisors or lecturers. These were intended to be more theoretically based and to address concerns both inside and outside of the university. This result is consistent with that of Sulphrey et al. (2018), who found a substantial association between Saudi university graduates' admission scores and their quality. It also supports the findings of Mohamad et al. (2019), who came to the conclusion that students who were admitted to Indonesian public institutions on the basis of merit fared better than those who were admitted via alternative methods. The study also confirmed the findings of Obono (2022), who discovered that merit-based admittance has a major impact on the caliber of graduates in Nigeria's Cross River State.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study concludes that, to enhance graduate quality, prospective university students should perform well in O-level, UTME, and post-UTME examinations, where applicable, and meet the minimum cut-off marks set by universities. This will strengthen their quality from the point of admission.

Based on the findings of the investigation, the study recommends that public universities in Nigeria, the use of merit, quota, and catchment admission criteria should continue to be emphasized, as these criteria significantly contribute to graduate quality.

Prospective students should be encouraged to study diligently and perform well in all examinations required for university admission. This will increase their chances of meeting the merit-based admission criteria, which had the greatest influence on graduate quality.

There are several limitations to this study on Nigerian government admission requirements and graduate quality. First, the study relied largely on respondents' self-reported data, which may be biased or overstated. Second, because the study was conducted in only a few selected institutions, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across Nigerian universities. Furthermore, the limited availability of comprehensive and up-to-date secondary data constrained the breadth of the analysis. Although these limitations are acknowledged, they highlight the need for caution when generalizing the results to other contexts without undermining the validity of the findings.

The study's conclusions have significant implications for higher education practice and policy. They suggest that existing admission practices may strongly influence the quality of admitted students and, consequently, the caliber of graduates produced. This underscores the importance for policymakers and stakeholders in the education sector to review and improve admission requirements to ensure alignment with the competencies, skills, and academic readiness expected for university education. Strengthening admission processes and support systems could enhance graduate quality, improve employability, and contribute to national development.

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### **Institutional Review Board Statement**

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria Institutional Review Board. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearances by National Universities Commission, Abuja

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