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A Review of Entry Requirements and Selection Procedures of Journalism Programmes In Nigeria

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Abstract

There have been studies and scholarly works on journalism education, with particular reference to journalism curriculum and its interface with journalism practice since the institutionalization of journalism education in Africa. However, very few studies have been done on the entry requirements and admission processes at various training institutions across Africa and in Nigeria particularly, despite an increase in the number of applications to journalism schools as compared to the available vacancies in most universities and other institutions that offer programme in journalism and mass communication. Consequently, this study was to ascertain standards and processes of admitting journalism students in Africa, and establish correlation and disparity between such standards and those in use in Nigeria. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) online Nigerian Journalism Schools database was used to analyse the various entry requirements for all the UNESCO accredited journalism training centres. Also, an online survey was conducted on a sample of UNESCO potential Centres of Excellence and Reference to identify the definition of a good student at the point of admission. Commonalities, divergences and the causes thereof were examined in order to provide insights into the Nigerian journalism educator's understandings of good journalism students and hence good journalism. Finally, the paper offered recommendations on the admission standards and processes that can be adopted by journalism schools in Nigeria.

Key Words: Journalism, Journalism Programmes, Training Institutions, Selection Procedures, Entry Requirements.

Introduction

Journalism is a more or less autonomous field of study across the globe, as exemplified by the (sometimes recent) appearance of dedicated scholarly national and international journals, annual international scientific conferences with dedicated panels, sessions and interest groups, and the emergence of a respectable body of theoretical and empirical literature particular to the field (Berkowitz, 1997; Löffelholz, 2004; Merrill, 2000; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Tumber, 1999; Zelizer, 2004). Yet while this rather self congratulatory conclusion may be true, one cannot help but notice that the education and training of journalists is a subject much debated but only rarely researched. Scholars from different parts of the world lament this, calling for studies on schools of journalism, on

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the determinants of journalism education, on the distinctions and similarities between industry training and professional education, and on the relationships between education, profession and society (Altmepfen and Homberg, 2002; Cottle, 2000; Morgan, 2003; Reese and Cohen, 2000). This is not to say that there is little or no journalism education literature; on the contrary, academic bookshelves and peer-reviewed journals feature the work of numerous writers on the subject. The problem with this body of literature according to Becker (2003) is that it tends to be either too normative, or that it remains overtly descriptive. Indeed, most of the journalism education literature tends to be very specific featuring case studies of what works or does not work in a particular curriculum, course or classroom or wildly generic where often senior scholars offer more or less historicized accounts of their lifelong experiences in "doing" journalism education. Regarding industry training, the literature does not offer many answers; overviews of education and training initiatives in particular countries tend just to mention or list these kinds of training programs initiated and paid for by news media organizations themselves (Bierhoff 2000). In recent years, several efforts have been made to professionalize the scholarship of journalism education (Reese and Cohen, 2000). Scholars in different parts of the world, such as Morgan (2000) Morgan (2003) in Australia, Weischenberg (2001) in Germany, Herbert (2000) in the United Kingdom, de Beer (1995) in South Africa, and Dickson (2000) in the United States published works to this effect. If anything, these publications suggest that although media systems and journalistic cultures may differ widely, the changes and challenges facing journalism education around the world are largely similar, and thus would benefit from a "global" approach (Gaunt, 1992). Global in the context of this essay means the lateral links one can identify across (real and perceived) national and cultural boundaries, which get particular meanings in situated contexts. Consequently, this scholarly paper is devoted to a conceptual synthesis of some of the key literature and findings from journalism education studies in respect of admission into journalism programmes on the Nigerian continent.

Unfortunately, as Bollinger (2003:11) opine, the interest on admission and selection of students into journalism schools has been inconsistent and scattered. The need to outline and examine the various entry requirements and selections procedures across the journalism schools on the Nigerian continent is made urgent by the fact that most journalism schools are receiving overwhelming number of applicants as compared to available vacancies. This means that it is more imperative to have not only fair selections methods but also valid ones, which can create a pool of a student body that has the interest, motivation, capacity and potential to succeed in the journalism industry.

Furthermore, there have been increasing choruses of criticisms of journalism schools especially from journalism industries on the Nigerian continent. According to Dickson (2000:34), many editors and practicing professionals maintain that most products of journalism schools are unfit for their purpose and that these journalism schools have been attacked for being ineffective and irrelevant to media realities since they churn out graduates who are unprepared for the real professional world. While, it has been the curriculum that has been blamed, it appears that close attention has not been placed on who is enrolling at journalism schools since it is possible that these schools may be recruiting students who are unfit and intellectually retarded to cope on any standard journalism programme. Students' entry level proficiencies in various attributes may be below than the required minimum threshold thereby affecting not only their output but also professional performance. Through selection procedures, it seems easy to screen students without the necessary mental capacity and professional aptitude to survive in the profession. The recent observations that not all required journalistic dispositions can be taught also call for effective selection procedures by journalism schools. Several attributes of journalists have been identified that are important for success in the

profession and as Carr (2003:111) argues, some may indeed be difficult to hone even in some of the best journalism schools. She argues:

Yet these attributes can be partially taught. Writing and critical thinking can be honed. But it would be very difficult to convince a highly intelligent but diffident and shy student to have the urge and determination to pursue vital information. The graduates, most in demand, clearly, are those who not only have the skills but are also temperamentally suited for the job.

Other scholars have identified a number of other personality attributes such as motivation, creativity, speaking abilities, social personality; nature that relishes variety of experiences, and insatiable curiosity as key to successful journalism career. Daun, (2002:36) had also argued for the importance of assessing a student's interpersonal skills on entry into journalism schools. He posits that less emphasis should be placed on good academic grades, while much attention should be devoted to ascertaining the ability of the applicant to predict success during journalism education and after graduation. Academic qualifications may therefore not be sufficient entry criteria to the journalism profession. Thus, in selecting qualified candidates for journalism training, it is imperative to include in the aptitude test, an assessment of the student's ability to complete the programme at any particular journalism school and succeed in the profession. This can only be predicted with success if journalism schools have valid and reliable selection measures. This paper generally provides an overview of selection measures used at various universities and colleges across the continent. The assumption of this paper is that journalism practice can only be useful if it is contextual and if those who practice it are committed and professionally capable.

The vast majority of Journalism schools worldwide seem to have selection strategies and measures which they use in one way or the other. Distilled from observations, journalism educators always seek to select individuals they believe will not only be fit to study successfully at their institutions but also to practice as journalists in future. With the use of selections measures, most schools try to establish whether the applicants have the writing potential, personality, general knowledge, inquiring mind, language skills, creative potential, and intellectual dexterity and sometimes experience to practice journalism as a career. The number of selection tools used by any journalism school, however, depends on variables such as governmental and institutional regulations, the nature of the programme, available resources, among others.

Factors that affect University Selection Strategies

It is imperative to note that any attempt to understand admission practices of Journalism schools will be incomplete without understanding the operational contexts of various schools and journalism training centres. As De Beer (1994:110) notes, there are a number of factors that interact with institutional admission and selection procedures that need to be understood. Exposing these factors, he mentions government policy, institutional culture, society –market relationships and confidence of stakeholders in particular higher institutions as affecting enrolment system. In his further commentary on this, he identifies government policy as a major factor. This position seems to have been reinforced and buttressed by Merrill (2004:47). He declares that governments do have both policy development and steering mechanisms which determine the nature of enrolment systems. They describe the role being played by government as interventionary and supervisory. Interventionary perspective explains the situation in which the state actively involves itself in enrolment system by attempting to control the nature of student output through revamping university entrance examination. Such States come up with policies and incentives that regulate student admission processes. On the other hand, the supervisory perspective holds that the State does not directly intervene in the enrolment systems; the universities and colleges have control over the admission criteria.

Institutional culture also relates to the institution's histories, resources and reputation(s), which affect the procedures of admission. Institutions build reputations and histories which they sometimes have to adhere to over time. Consequently, the way journalism schools recruit may be related to historical processes rather than current justifications. Available history, reputation and resources, all seem to have relationship with the number of applicants into any journalism programme and later the selection system that has to be adopted. Another factor relates to the the secondary school background of the applicant. Where, there is less confidence in secondary school sub sector, the higher education sector inclusive of Journalism Schools may adopt more rigorous selection processes such as university entrance examinations in order to select candidates who are intellectually upright, skilled and creatively endowed to do well and excel on the programme.

A Review of Admission Processes in Nigerian Journalism Schools

An examination of the various entry and selection measures by journalism schools in Africa shows that there are four basic types of admission practices used by Journalism schools. The selection criteria of most universities, polytechnics and institutions that offer programme in Journalism and Mass Communication can be categorized into four broad areas, which are represented in the figure below:

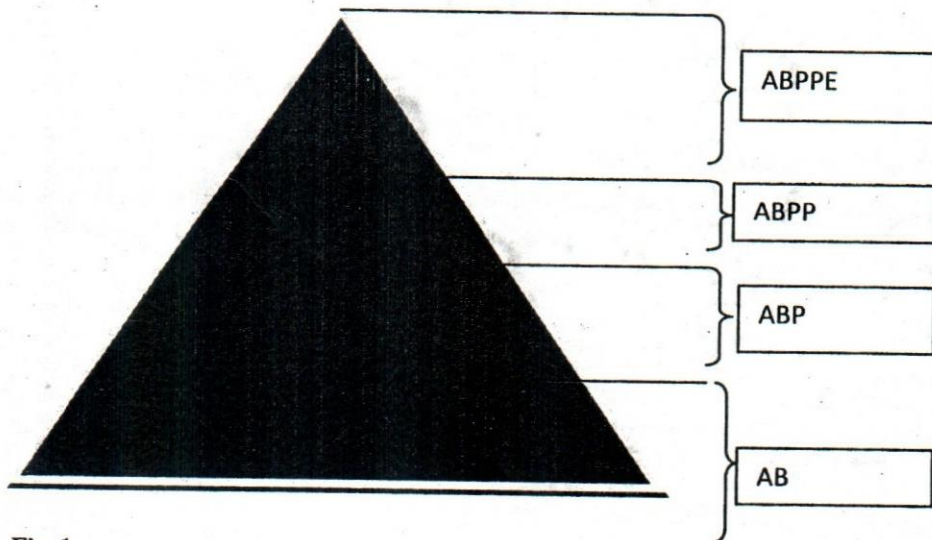


Fig. 1:

KEY:

AB- Academic Background at Secondary level

ABP- Academic Background and Professional Aptitude.

ABPP- Academic Background, Professional Aptitude and Personality Assessment.

ABPPE- Academic Background, Professional Aptitude, Personality and Equity Assessments.

Academic Background at Secondary School Level

The above diagram shows that most journalism schools still recruit their candidates just by using only their good academic grades at high and or secondary school. Thus, the underlying principle that informs this admission-policy is that superiority of academic performance leads to better results both in class and in the profession. Intelligent students will in future become intelligent journalists and editors who are adjudged as outstanding

journalists and those that will make successful journalism career (Deuze 2001:16) Apart from selecting candidates with the highest grades obtained from Secondary School Certificate Examinations, some universities require specific subject combinations at high school. Subjects often required are languages such as English, English literature, French and others. Some of the justifications for high standards and English requirements may be supported by the results of Deuze's (2001: 82) study that students who use English tend to do well in journalism Aptitude tests as well as spelling tests. Perhaps such findings suggest a support for the requirement of English as an Ordinary Level Subject that is compulsory for gaining admission into any academic programme in Nigeria.

However, Ogundimu (1992:41) notes that, in Nigeria, as it is the case in many Nigerian countries, many universities and colleges make English language a compulsory subject for admission into journalism schools while not recognizing local languages as a requirement for admission into such Schools. The major weakness of this system has been that the system does not make an attempt to assess the student on the basis of other critical factors apart from academic performance at secondary school level.

Academic Background and Professional Aptitude

Beyond the academic considerations cited above, this category of journalism schools is those that also consider journalism aptitude assessments. These institutions first carry out an academic screening and further, either use aptitude test or interviews to screen students. Professional orientation assessments may differ in forms and contents from one institution to another. Some have well organized systems such as computerized aptitude tests while others require merely sample written stories or productions. For well established systems, the assessment assesses the candidate's writing potential, understanding of the journalistic profession, motivation and news awareness. This type of preparation will result not only in increased throughput rates as well as professional success.

Academic Background, Professional Aptitude and Personality Assessment

Other schools go over and take a keen interest in personality dispositions. They do this through either the use of interviews or specific personality assessment questions as components of the journalism aptitude tests. As Kunkel(2003:31) argues, one of the key attributes of journalistic success are interpersonal skills. He mentions that some of the schools that have been identified as UNESCO Potential Centres of Excellence in Journalism and Mass Communication-training use this method of admission.

An emerging concern among universities is the issue of equity as a factor that affects admission. Apparently, equity considerations are rooted in gender, ethnicity, race, and in some cases geography. The rate at which each of these factors affects admission varies from one country to the other. Race is particularly an issue in gaining admission into higher institutions in South Africa, such as Rhodes University, Grahamstown and Tshwane University of Technology. Also, some universities have come up with different policies regarding equity considerations for women. A good instance is the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe whose forty (40) percent of her admission quota is to be filled by female students.

Academic Background, Professional Aptitude, Personality Assessment and Equity

Lastly, some schools take into account geographical and ethnic consideration. In Nigeria for instance, some states of the federation are regarded as educationally-disadvantaged. Consequently, candidates from such states who seek admission into some federal universities are offered admission in order to fill the quota for their states in such universities. In most cases, such candidates do not meet the apparently stringent

admission requirements which must be met by candidates from states that are not regarded as educationally-disadvantaged.

Improving on Journalism Schools' Admission Standards in Nigeria: What Strategies?

From the above discussion, it is apparent that that admission into journalism schools in a number of journalism schools in Africa takes into account, academic performance at secondary school level, professional aptitude, personality assessment and equity. Consequently, if journalism schools in Nigeria are to contribute to Nigeria's development through an offer of qualitative and vibrant journalism education, then, the process of recruiting candidates into journalism and mass communication programme in Nigeria needs to be reviewed and overhauled. It is however important to discuss interview as one significant tool that must be used in recruiting candidates into journalism programme in Nigeria. Interview, if accompanied by one or two other strategies, can play an important role in the quest for admission of good students by journalism schools in Nigeria.

An interview should be an important part of admission into journalism schools in Nigeria. This method is being used by many journalism schools on the Nigerian continent. The point being raised in this paper is that Journalism schools in Nigeria should conduct interview and make students seeking admission into journalism programme to appear before an interview panel as a way of verifying and ascertaining the originality and ingenuity of the qualifications being tendered by the students for the admission. This situation will also afford the schools the opportunity to identify the journalistic skills and aptitude of the candidates rather than just using the results obtained from secondary schools or equivalent institutions as the basis for admission. The interview is a veritable tool of cross checking the validity and reliability of other selection procedures that may be used by Journalism schools in Nigeria.

The figure below shows the recommended selection procedures:

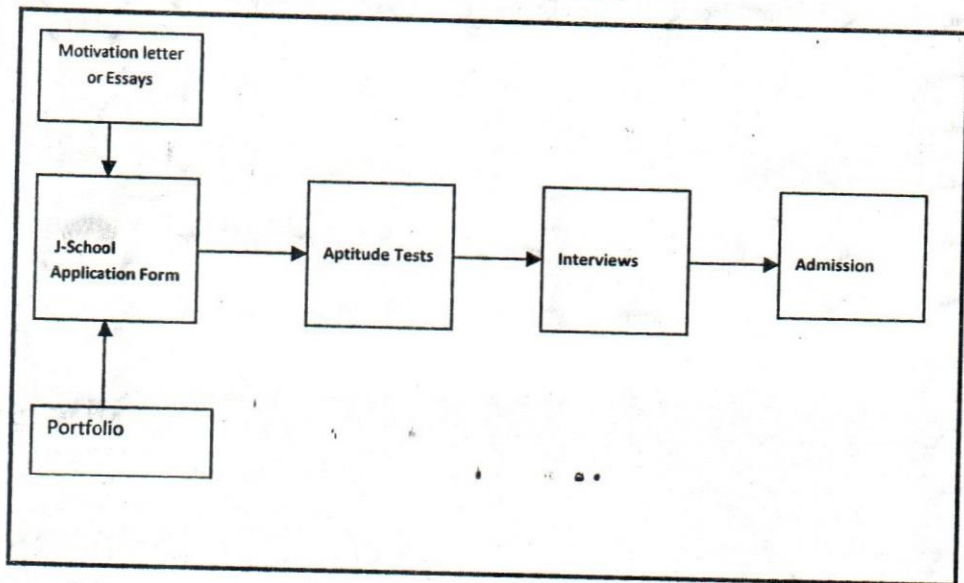


Fig. 2:

This figure identifies the important processes that can be adopted by journalism schools in Nigeria to recruit good students. It shows that a comprehensive process must begin at the application process. This is the first stage of the screening. Here, issues related to academic potential, equity, experience and motivation can be assessed particularly if the application form requires that applicants attach portfolios and motivation letters. Essays can also be required to assist in the assessment of language and creative potentials of applicants. The second stage of screening will include aptitude assessments, and this allows colleges to test professional potential. The information obtained from aptitude tests and the application form, can be re-examined and cross checked by subjecting the applicants to an interview process. As noted above, personality and other required attributes can also be assessed in this situation.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the foregoing that it is important to ensure that good students with potential enroll in journalism schools in Nigeria and these schools will only be able to do this if they select applicants who have good academic grades, with the appropriate journalistic aptitude, who are motivated, with the right personality attributes and that also take into account societal concerns on equity. Further research is however paramount to address issues relating to interview ratings and the potential of cross institution applications across the various schools and institutions that offer journalism and mass communication programme in the country.

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