

# Re-Assessing Centralised Tertiary Admissions in Nigeria: A Comparative Review of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board

\*Dolapo Temitayo Lawal, Lucky Chukwunaru Azum, Gracious Ojonibe Adaji, Olabisi Omolara Ekundayo, Pesopo Adefisayo Rasheed

University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines Nigeria's centralised tertiary admissions framework through a comparative review of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). Using qualitative methods—including theoretical discourse and comparative document analysis—it reviews literature on institutional efficiency and public admission systems. The study contrasts Nigeria's fully centralised model with hybrid systems in South Africa and the United Kingdom, as well as decentralised approaches in the United States. Findings reveal that while JAMB enhances transparency and coordination through tools like the Central Admission Processing System (CAPS), its rigid centralisation limits institutional autonomy and fails to resolve access inequalities. The paper recommends adopting a hybrid admissions model that balances central oversight with institutional discretion to improve equity, efficiency, and responsiveness in Nigeria's higher education system.

**Keywords:** Centralised admissions, JAMB, Institutional autonomy, Access inequality, Higher education policy  
JEL Classification: I23, H75, H52, D78

## INTRODUCTION

The structure and governance of tertiary education admission systems remain pivotal to national development goals, particularly in contexts characterised by institutional heterogeneity, demographic pressures, and educational inequality. In Nigeria, the central mechanism for managing access to tertiary education is the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), established in 1978 by Decree No. 2. This federal initiative emerged as a policy response to the inefficiencies of the decentralised admission system that prevailed in the immediate post-independence period. Prior to the advent of JAMB, individual universities conducted their entrance examinations, resulting in multiple tests, duplication of processes, and discriminatory admission practices based on regional and ethnic biases (Fafunwa, 1974; Okojie, 2010). Thus, JAMB was intended to centralise admissions, promote meritocracy, reduce inequities, and foster national integration through a standardised admissions process. Originally mandated to regulate admissions into federal universities, JAMB scope includes polytechnics and colleges of education, transforming it into a comprehensive admissions body for all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Over the past four decades, JAMB has introduced significant administrative and technological reforms, including the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and the Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS), designed to enhance transparency and standardisation (JAMB, 2022). Nonetheless, its relevance as a centralised regulatory body in the current educational landscape is increasingly contested as it now comprises of over 264 universities, polytechnics, and colleges—alongside the country's ongoing demographic transition which has significantly increased institutional diversity and administrative complexity (Tolu-Kolawole, 2023; Alawode and Lawal, 2025). Many institutions now possess the internal capacity to manage their admissions, and critics argue that the continued centralisation through JAMB stifles institutional autonomy, creates bureaucratic inefficiencies, and no longer reflects the differentiated needs of tertiary institutions (Adepoju and Osikoya, 2023). Moreover, instances of admission delays, inconsistencies in score normalisation, and alleged policy reversals have fuelled public distrust in JAMB's operational credibility (Akintoye & Ogunyemi, 2022; Odukoya, Chinedu, & Adeosun, 2021). These concerns were further amplified during the 2025 UTME cycle, when widespread reports of result irregularities, delayed score releases, system glitches, and contested cancellations dominated public discourse especially in the south eastern region and Lagos- domicile in the western part of the country. Major national dailies

documented complaints from candidates and parents regarding discrepancies between expected and released scores, as well as allegations of opaque review processes and weak communication by JAMB (Punch Newspapers, 2025; *The Guardian*, 2025). Although JAMB attributed many of these challenges to technical disruptions and anti-malpractice safeguards, the episode reinforced long-standing perceptions of administrative fragility within an otherwise centralised system.

Drawing from the foregoing, this paper critically assesses the foundational logic of JAMB's centralised framework and evaluates its contemporary effectiveness with Nigeria's evolving educational landscape (Peters, 2019; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; Ostrom, 2005). The study is structured as follows: Section Two provides a theoretical and empirical literature review with the underpinning theoretical framework. Section Three examines the comparative analysis of centralised Admission practices, comparing the Nigerian experience with models from both developed and developing economies, and lastly, the Conclusion, summary of findings and recommendations are offered in Section Four.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Theoretical Review of Literature**

The assessment of Nigeria's centralised tertiary admissions system, as administered by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), is grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks: public economics theory, social choice theory, and the principal–agent model. Taken together, these perspectives provide both normative justification and analytical tools for understanding the rationale, operational performance, and limitations of centralised admission systems in public higher education. Importantly, each theory highlights distinct strengths that support centralisation, while simultaneously revealing weaknesses that constrain its effectiveness in practice.

First, public economics theory offers a strong normative foundation for centralised admissions by emphasising the corrective role of the state in addressing market failures. As articulated by Musgrave (1959), the allocation function of public finance underscores how public institutions can promote allocative efficiency and equitable distribution of resources. In the context of higher education, education is conceptualised as a merit good whose social returns exceed private benefits, thereby justifying government intervention to prevent socially suboptimal outcomes. From this perspective, JAMB's centralised control over admissions serves as a mechanism for ensuring transparency, standardisation, and equity in access to scarce educational opportunities. Empirical applications of this framework and more recent analyses of state intervention in resource allocation further demonstrate that centralisation can reduce regional disparities and information asymmetries that often disadvantage applicants from less privileged backgrounds (Odukoya *et al.*, 2015; Lawal *et al.*, 2024). However, despite these strengths, public economics theory exhibits notable limitations. While centralisation may enhance allocative efficiency in theory, in practice it can generate bureaucratic rigidity that limits institutional responsiveness. Specifically, the framework pays limited attention to institutional heterogeneity, programme diversity, and administrative capacity. Consequently, excessive central control may undermine universities' ability to adapt admissions criteria to local contexts and evolving labour market demands. Thus, although public economics theory effectively explains why centralisation is justified, it is less equipped to account for the operational inefficiencies that may emerge from overly rigid governance structures.

Second, social choice theory provides a complementary analytical lens by focusing on the challenge of aggregating diverse individual preferences into collectively acceptable outcomes. Arrow's (1970) impossibility theorem highlights the inherent difficulty of designing decision-making mechanisms that simultaneously satisfy equity, fairness, and efficiency. In fragmented admissions systems, divergent institutional criteria and discretionary practices may favour select institutions or socio-economic groups. Accordingly, centralised admissions systems are theoretically appealing because they harmonise individual preferences through standardised assessments and centralised ranking procedures. In Nigeria, the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) administered by JAMB can be interpreted as an institutional response to this collective preference dilemma. For example, Okonjo and Balogun (2018) argue that UTME provides a consistent and transparent mechanism for managing mass admissions in a highly competitive system. Nonetheless, the explanatory power of social choice theory is not without limitations. Although standardisation promotes procedural fairness, it often assumes homogeneity among applicants and institutions. By contrast, higher

education systems are characterised by substantial variation in educational quality, socio-economic background, and institutional missions. As a result, uniform admission criteria may overlook contextual disadvantages and constrain differentiated institutional objectives. Therefore, while social choice theory strengthens the case for fairness in procedural terms, it may fall short in addressing substantive equity and diversity within the admissions process.

Third, the principal-agent model introduces an institutional governance perspective that sheds light on the relational dynamics between the state, regulatory agencies, and universities. Originally formulated by Ross (1973) and later formalised by Jensen and Meckling (1976), the model conceptualises JAMB as an agent acting on behalf of the federal government and public stakeholders. From this viewpoint, JAMB's centralised authority functions as a monitoring and enforcement mechanism designed to reduce information asymmetry between institutions and applicants, while also ensuring compliance with national education policies. Indeed, Ezekwesili (2006) highlights this strength by emphasising JAMB's role in promoting transparency, inclusion, and accountability in the admissions process. However, principal-agent theory also exposes persistent governance challenges. In particular, the model assumes rational, compliance-oriented behaviour among agents, an assumption that may not hold in politically contested institutional environments. Empirical evidence, such as Nwankwo and Adeyemi (2021), shows that tensions between JAMB and individual universities—especially regarding institutional autonomy and post-UTME implementation—often result in agency slippages. Thus, while the principal-agent framework is effective in explaining regulatory oversight and monitoring functions, it is less effective in capturing informal power dynamics and institutional resistance.

Fourth, institutional theory has been widely employed in the analysis of public organisations and policy regimes to explain how institutions emerge, evolve, and persist within specific socio-political and historical environments. The theory departs from purely efficiency-based explanations of organisational behaviour by emphasising that public institutions are shaped not only by technical considerations but also by norms, values, and legitimacy demands imposed by their operating environments (Scott, 2001). In the context of higher education governance, institutional theory provides important insights into why centralised regulatory bodies continue to exist and expand even amid persistent criticisms of their performance. A central proposition of institutional theory is that institutions function as stabilising mechanisms that structure social interaction and reduce uncertainty. North (1990) conceptualises institutions as the “rules of the game” that shape human behaviour by establishing predictable patterns of interaction. Applied to tertiary education admissions, this perspective has been used to explain the emergence of centralised admission authorities as responses to fragmented and inequitable systems. In Nigeria, scholarly accounts link the establishment of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) to the disordered pre-1978 admissions regime, which was characterised by multiple admissions, institutional capture, and administrative inefficiencies (Ajayi et al., 1996). From an institutional standpoint, JAMB's creation represented an effort to introduce procedural regularity, standardisation, and legitimacy into university admissions.

Beyond institutional emergence, the theory also sheds light on institutional persistence and path dependence. March and Olsen (1984) argue that public institutions endure not only because of their functional effectiveness but also because they become embedded as normative structures whose legitimacy is sustained through continuity and routinisation. This perspective has been applied in studies examining the expansion of mandates by public agencies, including the introduction of technological reforms. In the case of JAMB, reforms such as Computer-Based Testing (CBT) and the Central Admission Processing System (CAPS) have been interpreted as institutional adaptations aimed at preserving organisational legitimacy in response to public scrutiny and political pressure rather than solely as efficiency-enhancing innovations. Institutional theory further explains organisational convergence through the concept of isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures as mechanisms through which organisations adopt similar structures and practices. Centralised admissions bodies often exhibit coercive isomorphism through statutory mandates and regulatory authority; mimetic isomorphism through the replication of models perceived as successful in other national contexts; and normative isomorphism through professional standards governing assessment, transparency, and administrative impartiality.

Empirical analyses of JAMB suggest the presence of all three forms, reflecting its legal foundation, its adoption of centralised procedures from international models, and its alignment with professional norms of standardised testing. However, institutional theory also draws attention to the limitations of formal compliance.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that organisations frequently adopt formal structures that are only loosely coupled with actual practices, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive conformity. This insight has been used to explain tensions between centralised regulatory frameworks and institutional autonomy within higher education systems. In Nigeria, the coexistence of JAMB's centralised admission procedures with decentralised practices such as post-UTME screenings and institution-specific admission processes has been interpreted as evidence of loose coupling between formal rules and operational realities (Adebayo & Ogunyinka, 2019). Despite such tensions, the continued dominance of JAMB underscores its institutional legitimacy and embeddedness within the higher education system. Empirical studies from comparative contexts reinforce the relevance of institutional theory in analysing centralised admissions bodies.

## Empirical review of literature

Empirical investigations into centralised admission systems, especially in the context of developing countries like Nigeria, highlight a complex interplay between access, equity, institutional autonomy, and system-wide efficiency. The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), Nigeria's central coordinating agency for tertiary admissions, has been the subject of multiple empirical assessments since its establishment.

Adepoju and Babalola (2021) evaluated admission outcomes under JAMB's centralised system and found that while it improved transparency and limited duplicate admissions, it failed to significantly enhance access. Using UTME registration and admission data from 2010–2019, they reported that over 65% of qualified candidates were annually denied admission due to limited institutional capacity, pointing to a structural mismatch between demand and supply. Similarly, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) showed that of the 1.9 million UTME candidates in 2022, only about 600,000 gained admissions—a 31.5% success rate—illustrating systemic inefficiency despite centralised coordination. Adebayo and Ogunyinka (2019) examined how JAMB's implementation of the federal character principle affects regional equity in access. Drawing on admission data across 36 states between 2015 and 2018, the study found that candidates from educationally disadvantaged states had a higher admission success rate (42%) compared to those from educationally five advantaged zones (26%), despite lower average UTME scores. While the policy promoted geographic inclusion, the study raised concerns about meritocratic dilution and long-term quality implications.

According to Nwachukwu and Emeka (2020), in a survey-based study of ten federal universities, reported that 64% of admissions officers found the JAMB cut-off inadequate for evaluating discipline-specific readiness. Consequently, universities introduced post-UTME examinations to screen applicants further. This has created a dual-tier admissions structure, which, according to Uche and Oboh (2021), disproportionately burdens low income candidates who must pay additional fees and travel for supplementary assessments, exacerbating inequalities. Okonkwo (2022) assessed the effectiveness of technological interventions like Computer Based Testing (CBT) and the Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS). Using logistic regression on admission outcomes from 2015–2021, the study found that the implementation of CAPS improved institutional compliance with admission guidelines and reduced human discretion in candidate selection by 27%. However, candidates in rural regions were significantly underrepresented due to poor digital infrastructure, confirming that while technology improves efficiency, it can reproduce old inequalities in new forms.

An earlier study by Ijaiya (2016) conducted an audit of admission practices pre- and post JAMB reform using data from the University of Ilorin and Ahmadu Bello University. The findings indicated a 40% reduction in reported admission fraud after the adoption of JAMB's centralised list-checking and CAPS protocol, affirming the Board's role in safeguarding admission integrity. However, anecdotal evidence and qualitative interviews also pointed to persistent backdoor admissions influenced by political and institutional interests. Aina (2020) examined South Africa's Central Applications Office (CAO) and compared its admission distribution efficiency with JAMB. Using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests, Aina found that South Africa's hybrid model—with centralised application but decentralised decisions—achieved a higher alignment (78%) between applicant preferences and actual placement compared to Nigeria's (56%). The study recommended increased institutional input in the Nigerian model. In another comparative study, Liu and Zhao (2019) explored China's Gaokao system, reporting that while centralisation standardised evaluation, it placed excessive psychological pressure on students and reinforced rural-urban inequalities. Conversely, Hoxby (2009), using a panel of U.S. high school graduates, demonstrated how decentralised systems in the U.S. perpetuated admission disparities based on parental income and ethnicity. These studies suggest that both systems present trade-offs in efficiency and equity.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Institutional Theory, which explains how public institutions such as JAMB evolve, adapt, and persist within specific socio-political and historical contexts. Institutional theory posits that organisations are not only technical structures aimed at efficiency but are also shaped by norms, values, and legitimacy demands from their environments (Scott, 2001). In this framework, the relevance of JAMB lies not only in its functional capacity to administer entrance examinations but also in its symbolic role as a centralised authority that reinforces societal expectations of meritocracy, equity, and national integration. According to North (1990), institutions are “the rules of the game in a society”—they structure human interaction by providing stability and reducing uncertainty. From this perspective, JAMB emerged as a response to the disordered and inequitable pre-1978 tertiary admission system, which was marred by institutional capture, multiple admissions, and administrative inefficiencies (Ajayi *et al.*, 1996). Its institutionalisation was therefore aimed at establishing procedural regularity, standardisation, and legitimacy in university admissions. Institutional theory also explains the path dependence of JAMB—how its continued existence and expansion of mandate (CAPS and CBT) result from historical and political pressures rather than from pure functional necessity. As March and Olsen (1984) explain, public institutions tend to persist not only due to their performance but also because they become institutionalised norms whose legitimacy is sustained through continuity and isomorphism, where similar practices are adopted across sectors for legitimacy rather than effectiveness. The theory further underscores those public institutions evolve through three types of isomorphism: coercive (pressures from government or laws), mimetic (copying successful models), and normative (pressures from professionalisation) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). JAMB’s structure reflects all three. Coercive isomorphism is evident in its legal backing and federal mandate; mimetic tendencies are visible in its adoption of centralised procedures from seven countries like France and China; and normative isomorphism is reflected in how its procedures conform to professional expectations of fair assessment and administrative impartiality.

Moreover, Meyer and Rowan (1977) contend that institutions often adopt formal structures that are only loosely coupled with their actual practices, resulting in symbolic compliance. This insight is key to understanding the growing mismatch between JAMB’s centralised model and universities’ desire for autonomy, as evidenced by the rise of post-UTME screenings and institutional admission portals (Adebayo & Ogunyinka, 2019). The persistence of JAMB, despite these contestations, speaks to its symbolic legitimacy and embeddedness in Nigeria’s higher education system. Empirical studies have used Institutional Theory to assess centralised education bodies. For instance, Aina (2020) applied the framework in evaluating South Africa’s Central Applications Office (CAO), finding that institutional legitimacy was central to its survival despite decentralised preferences by universities. Similarly, Agu and Odii (2021), examining JAMB’s transformation since the introduction of CAPS and CBT, argue that the agency’s reforms were driven more by institutional pressures to restore credibility than by internal efficiency goals. Furthermore, Olatunji (2023) shows how institutional commitments to federal character quotas reflect the broader political economy of Nigerian education, where social representation is prioritised alongside merit. Institutional Theory aptly explains this as the balancing of institutional logics: meritocracy versus equity, centralisation versus autonomy. In essence, Institutional Theory allows for a critical interrogation of JAMB’s dual identity—as both a regulatory body meant to ensure fairness and a politically-embedded institution subject to competing logics and pressures. It also explains why JAMB reforms (e-registration, CBT, CAPS) are often only partially effective, as they are shaped by external expectations rather than internal rationality.

### Comparative Analysis of Centralised Admission in Nigeria

Cross-national studies of admission systems reveal a spectrum of models, from rigid centralised systems to decentralised or hybrid frameworks. These studies are critical in examining the relationship between equity, meritocracy, institutional autonomy, and policy goals. Salmi (2003) and Altbach *et al.* (2009) categorised admissions frameworks into three main types: Highly centralised systems (China and Iran) with state-controlled examinations, Hybrid systems (South Africa and Turkey) where applications are centralised, but institutions retain decision rights and decentralised systems (USA and Canada), where universities conduct their processes. These typologies provide a global benchmark for assessing efficiency, transparency, and access. Chankseliani and McCowan (2021), in a study of 35 countries, found that centralised models promote procedural equity but often neglect context-specific needs of individual institutions and students.

**Table 1: Comparative Summary of Admission Models and Selection Criteria Across Countries**

Country	Admission Model	Application Process	Primary Selection Criteria	Institutional Autonomy	Equity/ Inclusion Mechanisms	Key Strengths	Key Limitations
China	Highly centralised	Single national application via Gaokao system	National standardised examination score (Gaokao)	Very low	Uniform testing; regional quotas	Perceived meritocracy; procedural fairness	High psychological pressure; rural–urban inequality; no contextual assessment
Iran	Highly centralised	Centralised application via Sanjesh	National entrance examination; ideological screening	Very low	Central allocation of slots	Administrative efficiency; state control	Suppresses innovation; politicised selection; limited academic fit
France	centralised	Parcoursup digital platform	High school grades, subject choices, algorithmic ranking, social and geographic indicators	Moderate	Geographic quotas; contextual indicators	Transparency; standardisation; digital efficiency	Stratification favouring elite schools; complex navigation for disadvantaged students
United Kingdom	Decentralised (central application)	UCAS single application portal	Predicted grades, personal statements, references, interviews, contextual data	Very high	Contextual admissions outreach programmes	Institutional flexibility; discipline-specific assessment	Persistent class-based inequality; opaque decisionmaking
South Africa	Hybrid	Central Applications Office (CAO)	National Senior Certificate results, subject prerequisites, institutional cut-offs, equity adjustments	High	Affirmative action; redress policies	Balance between merit and equity; institutional discretion	Variation across institutions; regional coverage limitations
Nigeria	Highly centralised	JAMB via UTME and CAPS	UTME scores; post-UTME screenings; federal character quotas	Low to moderate	Federal character principle; cut-off benchmarks	Transparency; reduced fraud; national coordination	Limited autonomy; capacity constraints; merit– quota tension
United States	Decentralised	Institution-specific applications	GPA, SAT/ACT (optional), essays, recommendations, extracurriculars	Very high	Holistic review; affirmative action (context-dependent)	Holistic assessment; institutional diversity	High application costs; inequality in preparation
Canada	Decentralised	Institution-specific or provincial portals	Secondary school grades; programme-specific prerequisites	Very high	Provincial equity initiatives	Simplicity; strong institutional fit	Limited national coordination

Source: Author's compilation based on Salmi (2003); Altbach *et al.* (2009); Chankseliani & McCowan (2021)

## Developed Economies (France and the United Kingdom)

In developed countries, centralised admissions are often underpinned by digital infrastructure, accountability frameworks, and standardised metrics. However, even these systems face criticism related to autonomy and inequality. France operates the *Parcoursup*<sup>1</sup> platform, a centralised digital portal for university admissions where students apply to institutions nationwide through a single platform. Admission decisions are made centrally using students' high school performance, geographic quotas, and social background indicators. Héran (2020) found that while *Parcoursup* promotes equity and standardisation, it reinforces stratification by favouring students from elite schools in urban areas and uses a ranking algorithm and decision matrices to allocate students. However, Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often lack the counselling needed to navigate the system (Rivière, 2021). In the same vein, the UK uses the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) system, where students submit a single application to multiple universities. This promotes efficiency and transparency. Institutional autonomy is preserved, as final decisions rest with individual universities. Boliver (2015) found that top-tier universities still disproportionately admit students from elite private schools, showing that centralisation does not eliminate social disparities.

## Developing Economies (China, South Africa and Iran)

Centralised admissions in developing countries tend to prioritise access, political stability, and equity, often reflecting socio-political balancing acts. China operates one of the world's most centralised and competitive systems—the *Gaokao*<sup>2</sup>. Under this system, a national standardised exam determines admission to virtually all higher institutions. Liu (2018) reports that *Gaokao* is considered fair and meritocratic but imposes extreme psychological pressure and widens rural-urban disparities due to unequal school quality. Although Universities have little autonomy in selection, this limits flexibility in curricular focus and innovation. South Africa South Africa uses the CAO, a hybrid model where students apply centrally, but institutions retain admission decision power. Aina (2020) found that this model promotes transparency and reduces multiple admissions, but institutional autonomy is respected. This allows institutions to tailor admission criteria to disciplinary needs while ensuring centralised data and policy coordination. While for Iran, Sanjesh is a fully centralised admissions body that administers the national entrance exam. Although this has been criticised because centralisation is used as a state tool for ideological vetting and control, often sidelining institutional innovation (Majidi, 2017).

## The Case of Centralised Admissions in Nigeria through JAMB

Nigeria's centralised admissions framework is anchored in the institutional architecture of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), which regulates entry into federal, state, and private tertiary institutions. Established in 1978, JAMB was conceived as a policy response to the growing inefficiencies, fraud, and inequities in Nigeria's decentralised admissions era. Its primary mandate was to standardise admission processes, prevent multiple admissions, and ensure equitable geographic representation in higher education—an objective rooted in the broader post-civil war national integration agenda (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996). The operational mechanisms of JAMB are channelled through two key instruments: the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and the Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS). Over the years, significant reforms have been introduced to enhance the system's efficiency and credibility. Notably, the transition to Computer-Based Testing (CBT) and the digitalisation of admission offers via CAPS have modernised the admission process and reduced incidences of malpractice (Okonkwo, 2022). Empirically, the centralised model has delivered several strengths. Foremost among these is the promotion of merit-based

<sup>1</sup> *Parcoursup* is a French portmanteau derived from two components: “*Parcours*”, meaning “pathway” or “course,” which refers to the educational or academic path a student follows, and “*Sup*”, an abbreviation of “*supérieur*”, meaning “higher,” as in higher education. Together, *Parcoursup* literally translates to “Pathway to Higher Education”, denoting the centralised platform through which students apply to French universities.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaokao* (高考, *Gāokǎo*) is short for “*Gāozhōng Kǎoshì*”, meaning “National Higher Education Entrance Examination” in China. It is a centralised exam used for admission to universities nationwide.

competition, as all candidates are subjected to a uniform national 10 examination. The incorporation of digital platforms such as

CAPS has also enhanced transparency, minimising the opacity that previously characterised university-specific admission processes. Furthermore, JAMB plays a pivotal role in the enforcement of the federal character principle, which ensures that admission slots are geographically distributed to reflect Nigeria's ethno-regional diversity. However, several structural limitations persist. One major critique is the suppression of institutional autonomy. Although JAMB centralises the ranking and offer-making processes, many universities, dissatisfied with the sufficiency of UTME scores as a singular metric of potential, have resorted to conducting post-UTME screenings to maintain academic standards (Adebayo & Ogunyinka, 2019). This practice implicitly undermines the uniformity that JAMB seeks to institutionalise. Moreover, there are equity concerns related to capacity constraints in the tertiary sector.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023), more than 500,000 candidates score above the minimum benchmark of 180 annually. However, fewer than 200,000 are admitted, not due to poor performance but because of infrastructural and capacity bottlenecks within Nigerian institutions. This creates a paradox where qualified candidates are systematically excluded, despite performing well under the centralised system. Perhaps most contentious is the merit-versus-quota dilemma embedded in the enforcement of the federal character principle. While intended to enhance inclusion, critics argue that this policy often results in the sacrifice of academic merit for regional representation. Olatunji (2023) contends that such practices dilute the meritocratic ideal of the system by privileging candidates from educationally disadvantaged states, sometimes at the expense of higher scoring applicants from more competitive regions. In essence, JAMB's centralised admission system reflects a complex interplay of policy goals: meritocracy, equity, national integration, and institutional accountability. While it has succeeded in unifying and digitising admissions in Nigeria, persistent concerns around university autonomy, capacity deficits, and quota politics suggest that the model requires ongoing reform to balance its multiple objectives effectively.

## COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The architecture of centralised admissions in tertiary education is profoundly shaped by the broader political organisation of government, whether federal or unitary, as well as the policy imperatives of standardisation, access, institutional autonomy, and national integration. While 11 centralised systems aim to ensure meritocracy, efficiency, and transparency, their design and effectiveness vary significantly across countries. This discussion compares centralised admission systems in Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, analysing how governance structures influence their operation and outcomes. Nigeria presents a unique paradox in the implementation of centralised admissions within a federal system. Although federalism typically implies the devolution of powers and responsibilities, especially in education, the Nigerian state exercises near-absolute control over tertiary admissions through the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). Established in 1978, JAMB was conceived to address inefficiencies such as multiple admissions, regional disparities, and fraudulent practices in the pre-1978 decentralised regime (Ajayi *et al.*, 1996). Over time, its function has evolved into a highly centralised operation managing over 1.9 million candidates annually for approximately 600,000 available tertiary slots (JAMB, 2023). JAMB's central role is operationalised through the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and the Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS), which facilitate admission ranking and offer issuance. While these instruments have introduced a level of standardisation and transparency, particularly through the adoption of Computer-Based Testing (CBT) and digital admission notifications (Okonkwo, 2022), they have also attracted criticism for limiting institutional autonomy.

Public universities, many of which possess unique disciplinary and pedagogical requirements, are compelled to adopt supplementary assessments such as the post UTME to better evaluate candidates (Adebayo & Ogunyinka, 2019). Furthermore, Nigeria's application of the federal character principle, which seeks to distribute admission slots geographically, reveals the tension between meritocratic ideals and equity driven social engineering. While the policy has arguably fostered national integration by ensuring that students from less-developed regions gain access to tertiary institutions, critics argue that it has compromised merit by admitting lower-scoring candidates over more academically qualified peers from competitive states (Olatunji, 2023). This conflict underscores the difficulty of reconciling national unity objectives with institutional and

academic standards in a multi-ethnic federal polity. South Africa: A Hybrid Approach under Quasi-Federalism In contrast, South Africa operates a unitary state with notable quasi-federal characteristics in higher education governance. Though not constitutionally federal, the country's higher education policy encourages institutional discretion through the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and a model of cooperative governance. Admissions are primarily coordinated through the Central Applications Office (CAO), which aggregates applications and forwards them to respective institutions. Crucially, final admission decisions rest with the universities themselves, preserving autonomy while benefiting from the logistical efficiencies of centralisation (Aina, 2020). This hybrid arrangement offers a middle ground between Nigeria's centralised model and the United Kingdom's decentralised regime. It allows institutions to maintain control over discipline-specific requirements while achieving administrative order through a unified application portal. In practice, this has enabled South African universities to implement affirmative action and redress policies aimed at addressing the legacies of apartheid. To further contextualize this, Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) have highlighted how this approach facilitates context sensitive admissions that can prioritise social justice without entirely relinquishing academic standards. Moreover, the CAO's regional specificity—used predominantly in KwaZulu Natal—allows for experimentation and localised policy alignment, something Nigeria's uniform centralisation inhibits. The South African experience illustrates that a hybrid admissions model, underpinned by political coordination and institutional flexibility, can achieve a functional balance between equity, merit, and responsiveness.

Comparatively, the United Kingdom- Nigeria's colonial master, exemplifies the opposite end of the spectrum. Despite its unitary political structure, the UK's tertiary admissions system is deeply decentralised. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) plays a largely administrative role, providing a platform for applications and communication, but it exerts no control over admissions criteria or decision-making. Universities independently determine their entry requirements, conduct interviews, and use contextual data to make final decisions (UCAS, 2023). This arrangement aligns with the UK's broader market-oriented education philosophy, where universities compete for students and operate with considerable autonomy. Hoxby and Avery (2013) argue that such competition enhances quality and responsiveness, especially in elite institutions, by incentivising performance and innovation. However, this freedom comes at a cost. The absence of regulatory oversight has perpetuated disparities in access, particularly along racial, geographic, and class lines. Boliver (2015) notes that top-tier institutions often admit disproportionately fewer students from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds, despite efforts at widening participation. Unlike Nigeria and, to a lesser extent, South Africa, the UK does not apply affirmative quota systems. Instead, it relies on institutional outreach and funding incentives to promote diversity. Brown (2011) critiques this model for its tendency to entrench inequality, especially as admissions processes become increasingly influenced by private schooling, cultural capital, and familial networks. Across these three countries, it becomes evident that political structure alone does not determine the degree of centralisation in tertiary admissions. Nigeria's highly centralised regime defies federalist logic, reflecting instead a political calculus prioritising unity and administrative control. South Africa's hybrid system, shaped by a unitary but consultative governance model, combines coordination with institutional flexibility. The UK's decentralised admissions process is embedded within a neoliberal education framework that valorises institutional autonomy and competition. What emerges from this comparative discussion is a complex trade-off between centralisation for equity and order (as seen in Nigeria), and decentralisation for innovation and institutional discretion (as seen in the UK). South Africa's hybrid model suggests a possible path for countries like Nigeria to consider—a framework where national coordination coexists with the autonomy necessary for pedagogical relevance and contextual responsiveness.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

This paper sets out to *examines Nigeria's centralised tertiary admissions framework through a comparative review of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB)* using a theoretical, empirical, and comparative approach. Anchored on the institutional theory, it conceptualised JAMB as a state-constructed response to admission-related inefficiencies that once plagued Nigeria's tertiary education landscape, such as multiple admissions, corruption, and lack of equitable access. The theoretical discussion revealed that centralised systems like JAMB are typically justified on grounds of enhancing efficiency, transparency, and fairness—objectives which JAMB has partially fulfilled through initiatives like the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), the Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS), and the introduction of computer-based testing. These reforms have improved standardisation and automation in tertiary

admissions, contributing to national integration through the enforcement of the federal character principle. However, they have also inadvertently created systemic tensions between central control and institutional autonomy, especially as universities increasingly supplement JAMB with their post-UTME exams to better assess candidate preparedness. The empirical evidence, as reviewed, paints a dual picture: on one hand, JAMB has helped reduce fraudulent admissions and ensure a baseline of merit-based selection; on the other, it has failed to address deep-seated issues of access, under-capacity, and regional fairness, particularly for disadvantaged candidates. Despite high numbers of candidates meeting the UTME benchmark annually, limited institutional capacity results in systemic exclusion. This has fuelled frustrations, inefficiencies, and a perceived lack of responsiveness to the needs of both students and institutions. A comparative analysis provided deeper insight. Countries such as the United Kingdom and South Africa, though operating under differing governance systems (unitary and decentralised federal, respectively)—offer flexible models that balance national coordination with institutional discretion. The UK's UCAS facilitates logistical centralisation while allowing universities to determine final admissions based on internal criteria. South Africa's CAO aggregates applications but gives institutions autonomy over offers. These systems demonstrate that coordination does not have to mean rigid centralisation. Rather, adaptive centralisation, which accommodates institutional diversity and academic autonomy, can yield more inclusive and efficient outcomes. In Nigeria's federal structure, where educational institutions vary significantly in mission, capacity, and demographic reach, a rigidly centralised model like JAMB's may no longer be optimal. Instead, the path forward lies in reforming institution's mandate—from being the sole gateway to tertiary admissions to acting as a coordinating and regulatory authority that sets national benchmarks, aggregates data, ensures compliance, and facilitates equity goals, without micromanaging institutional decision-making.

### **Policy recommendation**

Based on insights drawn from comparative analyses of centralised and hybrid admission systems in countries such as South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the efficiency, equity, and responsiveness of Nigeria's tertiary admissions system. Crucially, these recommendations outline not only policy direction but also practical implementation pathways, regulatory realignments, and institutional capacity requirements necessary for a sustainable hybrid admissions framework.

#### **Adopt a hybrid admission model with tiered institutional autonomy.**

Nigeria should transition to a hybrid admissions model in which JAMB retains responsibility for application aggregation, candidate verification, and minimum eligibility screening, while universities are empowered to make final admission decisions in line with programme-specific academic standards and institutional missions. Implementation should follow a phased approach, beginning with pilot institutions that demonstrate adequate administrative capacity, robust ICT infrastructure, and transparent admissions governance. Regulatory guidelines issued by the Federal Ministry of Education should formally redefine the division of responsibilities between JAMB and institutions, with JAMB shifting from prescriptive control to system-wide oversight through periodic audits, performance benchmarking, and compliance reviews.

#### **Reform equity mechanisms in admissions through context-sensitive selection criteria.**

The current quota-based Federal Character Policy should be recalibrated into a more flexible, context-sensitive equity framework that accounts for socio-economic disadvantage, school quality, and regional educational disparities without unduly compromising academic merit. Practical implementation could involve the introduction of weighted admission scores or contextual adjustment indices—similar to practices in the United Kingdom—integrated into JAMB's digital platforms. This would require regulatory amendments to existing admissions guidelines and the development of nationally agreed indicators of disadvantage, jointly administered by JAMB, institutions, and relevant statistical agencies.

#### **Reposition JAMB as a quality assurance and advisory institution.**

JAMB should evolve from a centralised gatekeeping authority into a national admissions quality assurance and advisory body. In this redefined role, JAMB would focus on setting minimum admission standards, accrediting institutional admissions processes, publishing system-wide performance metrics, and providing technical

guidance rather than directly determining individual admission outcomes. Implementing this transition would require legislative review of JAMB's enabling Act, alongside the establishment of specialised units for data analytics, institutional support, and policy evaluation. Such reforms would preserve procedural integrity while reducing friction between central coordination and institutional autonomy.

### **Expand institutional capacity and digitally harmonise admissions processes.**

Effective implementation of a hybrid admissions model is contingent upon significant expansion of institutional capacity. Federal and state governments should prioritise targeted investments in physical infrastructure, academic staffing, and digital systems to address persistent admission bottlenecks. Concurrently, a fully integrated digital admissions ecosystem should be developed, linking JAMB, tertiary institutions, and applicants through interoperable platforms. Real-time data dashboards can support decentralised decision-making, enhance transparency, and enable continuous monitoring of equity and access outcomes. Without these capacity and technological investments, regulatory reforms alone will be insufficient to achieve meaningful admissions reform.

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