

## ENHANCING ACCESS, QUALITY, AND EQUITY: TOWARDS COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION SECTOR REFORMS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Education stands as a fundamental human right and a catalyst for personal, economic, and societal advancement. This paper explores the evolution of education in Nigeria, highlighting significant reforms aimed at enhancing its quality and accessibility. It discusses the challenges facing the education sector, including inadequate financing, corruption, curriculum deficiencies, teacher training issues, weak leadership, infrastructural deficits, and a lack of political will. Drawing on historical context and contemporary analyses, the paper provides recommendations to address these barriers and promote equitable, inclusive, and effective education in Nigeria. The paper concludes with recommendations to overcome these barriers and foster quality education for all Nigerians, emphasizing the importance of increased investment, anti-corruption measures, curriculum reform, teacher training, leadership enhancement, and infrastructure development.

### Introduction

Education is a cornerstone of human rights and a catalyst for personal, economic, and societal advancement. It empowers individuals with the essential knowledge and competencies to comprehend and engage with the world, nurturing their personal and professional growth. At a broader level, education fuels economic progress, diminishes poverty and disparities, cultivates harmony and resilience, and advocates for sustainable behaviors. In the Nigerian context, the education system has undergone significant restructuring to enhance its quality and accessibility. These reforms are pivotal in addressing the multifaceted challenges within the education domain and leveraging its potential for societal upliftment.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which enshrines the right to education for all, was drafted and ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1948 (UNESCO, 2015). More precisely, it is stated that "Every individual is entitled to receive education, it should be provided without charge, particularly in the early years and must be mandatory". According to UNESCO (2015), widespread access to technical and professional education should exist. The UDHR is widely acknowledged for its role in establishing over 70 human rights treaties currently enforced permanently at regional and global levels.

Since ratifying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), education has changed to fulfill human requirements better. 1990 Education for All gained prominence because millions of children were denied their fundamental right to education due to unequal access to schools (UNESCO, 1990). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as the

framework for promoting sustainable development on a global scale. The SDGs aim to convey the implementation outcomes to internal and external stakeholders effectively. Additionally, they aim to clearly define and elucidate current and future development challenges, which sets them apart from the original Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Backes & Traverso, 2022).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has suggested dedicating 15–26% of the yearly budget to education to stimulate significant worldwide investment in the education sector. Additionally, in order to advise nations on financial support for education, UNESCO launched the Education for All (EFA) project in 2000–2015 (Mundy, 2016). Education for All advocated in their recommendation for a large increase in education financing and a financial commitment from the federal government to quicken the sector's growth. Subnational financial expenditures for education have been pitifully low each year, well below UNESCO's suggested standard of 15–26%.

However, Nigeria's budgetary allotment to education was less than the 15% to 26% of GDP that UNESCO recommended, indicating that the country has not invested in education at the recommended level for almost ten years (Ogunode et al., 2024). Due to misaligned policy and budgetary goals, a lack of access and inclusion, gender imbalances, physical hurdles, curriculum limits, and inadequate teacher preparation, Nigeria is not succeeding in delivering inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education (Ogunode et al., 2024). The Nigerian education system will fail and worsen social and economic inequality if these problems are not resolved. In light of this, the research on the obstacles to and kinds of access that affect the reforms' implementation

### **History Context of Educational Reform in Nigeria**

Nigeria's education system has come a long way. During British rule, the focus was on training clerks for the colonial government, neglecting the needs and aspirations of Nigerians (Ogeh. & Alfred, 2023). This limited educational opportunities and created a north-south divide, with the North's Islamic education system overshadowed by the Western-style education in the south (Malley, 2023). Following independence, Nigerians yearned for a national education system. The 1977 National Policy on Education marked a turning point. It aimed to make education more relevant, expand access through Universal Basic Education (UBE), and equip students with practical skills for national development (Ella, 2020). In 1969, the 6-3-3-4 system was introduced, offering a more structured approach with primary, junior secondary, senior secondary, and tertiary education phases (Ukeje & Aisiku, 2022). Students could explore interests and specialize in later stages. The current system, known as 9-3-4 or UBE, extends the basic education phase to nine years. This aims to provide a stronger foundation before students move on (Salahu, 2020). However, challenges remain. Quality of education, access disparities, and limited resources continue to be hurdles (Salahu, 2020). Addressing these issues requires increased investment, improved teacher training, community engagement, technology integration, and targeted strategies to bridge the north-south divide.

### **Barriers to Quality Education in Nigeria**

There are many barriers affecting the quality of education in Nigeria. Some of the barriers include:

### **Financing**

The poor implementation of the National policy on education financing by all three tiers of government has emerged as a significant barrier to successful reform in Nigeria (Enyiazu, 2022). Despite clear guidelines outlined in the policy, such as the requirement for adequate financial provisions from all levels of government, including the private sector, to ensure the successful implementation of education programs, the reality needs to be revised. The policy emphasizes the importance of joint responsibility among the Federal, State/FCT, Local Governments, and Private sector to fund education adequately (Jacob & Samuel, 2020). However, the inability of the Nigerian government to adhere to these provisions has resulted in low investment in the country's educational system (Jacob & Samuel, 2020).

Specifically, the failure to allocate the recommended minimum of 26% of the combined budget of the Federal, State, and Local Governments to education funding, as per the UNESCO standard recommendation, has contributed to the deficiency in public investment in education (Amadi & Nwogu, 2020). This lack of adequate funding hampers the quality of education, infrastructure development, teacher training, and overall educational outcomes, thus hindering Nigeria's successful implementation of education reforms (Ogunode, 2020).

### **Corruption**

Corruption is a formidable barrier to successful educational reform in Nigeria, siphoning off significant funds that could be invested in addressing critical challenges and revitalizing the sector (Onah et al., 2021). Shockingly, it is estimated that a staggering 70 to 75 percent of the national budget is lost to corrupt practices across all levels of governance, severely undermining the implementation of government expenditure plans (Agunyai & Ojakorotu, 2021). Transparency International revealed that a substantial portion of the funds allocated for education in Nigeria, up to 66 percent was embezzled by corrupt officials, exacerbating the financial constraints already facing the education sector (Ogunode et al., 2022). This widespread corruption not only hinders access to quality education but also undermines learning outcomes, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage for children and communities across the country (Ogunode et al., 2022). As Jacob et al. (2020) highlighted, corruption in education administration directly contributes to the shortage of funds available for effectively managing the education system, hampering efforts to implement meaningful reforms and improve educational outcomes for all.

### **Inadequate Curriculum**

Inadequate curriculum presents a significant barrier to quality education in Nigeria, as highlighted by the gaps in knowledge and relevance to students' social and cultural contexts (Khosa & Makuvire, 2021). The need for more user-friendly instructional methods aligned with appropriate curriculum content limits students' engagement and understanding of the educational material (Nwajiuba et al., 2020). Particularly problematic is the reliance on monolingual pedagogy, which fails to accommodate the linguistic diversity present in Nigeria and impedes cognitive and academic development, especially for students learning in a secondary or foreign language (Ikwuemesim, 2021). Translanguaging, which engages learners in their home language, offers potential solutions by recognizing diversity and removing barriers to participation and achievement (Yilmaz, 2021). Additionally, the absence of Indigenous knowledge in Nigerian education systems further compounds the inadequacy of the curriculum, as it fails to incorporate the unique practices, histories, and identities of cultural groups within Nigeria (Kanu et al., 2020). Integrating Indigenous knowledge into the formal education curriculum holds promise for enhancing students' understanding of their environment and better preparing them to address local challenges (Assefa, 2021). Despite

recognizing the importance of Indigenous knowledge, efforts to integrate it still need to be expanded, particularly at the primary and secondary education levels, thus perpetuating the barrier of inadequate curriculums for quality education in Nigeria.

### **Inadequate Teacher Training and Support**

Teacher education in Nigeria faces numerous challenges that impact the quality of education in the country. These challenges include teacher absenteeism, insufficient experience, and inadequate training and resources to equip teachers with effective, learner-centered pedagogy (Shah, 2020). Such limitations not only affect the professional development of teachers but also hinder opportunities for students across Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries (Zickafoose et al., 2024). Additionally, the Higher Education (HE) sector in Africa needs help to align efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) due to teacher training and infrastructure (Zickafoose et al., 2024).

### **The Weak Administrators**

The issue of the incompetent administrators appointed by the government to lead educational institutions burdened with the responsibility of implementing various government educational programs or plans is another issue impeding the implementation of education strategic plans or action plans in Nigeria (Jacob & Ndubuisi, 2020). Some of these directors, chief executives, or deputy general managers need to gain the training, expertise, or experience necessary to encourage and successfully implement educational initiatives within their organizations. According to Ogunode (2020), most administrators chosen by the government to manage the nation's educational institutions are less qualified for those roles. Most people do not work professionally in education; they need to gain the knowledge and expertise necessary to run an institution of higher learning to an exceptional degree.

### **Inadequate Facilities for Infrastructure**

One of the main obstacles to the successful implementation of education reforms in Nigerian educational institutions is the need for more suitable infrastructure (Ndubuisi & Jacob, 2020). Large-scale infrastructure is needed to carry out several government education programs, but this is something that only some educational institutions nationwide have. Infrastructure plays a critical role in the execution of educational programs. Nigeria is experiencing historic levels of deterioration in institutional, state, municipal, and national infrastructure (Ola, 2020). Given the current circumstances, implementing any educational strategy or program may take time. All educational levels' worth of facilities and equipment are completely broken. The school buildings that are still intact are either falling apart or have missing windows and doors. A few nice seats and tables are still available for teachers and the growing student body in most schools. Many schools need a scientific lab, library, or workshop. In the sciences, practical sessions are only introduced to students before final exams. Water and power are not linked to many schools, and the services are either scarce or nonexistent in those that have.

### **The Lack of Political Will**

The lack of political will to support implementation hinders Nigeria's adoption of strategic educational plans. Because of differences in political parties, many political officeholders lack the political will to carry out the educational objectives or programs of the previous administration (Ndubuisi & Jacob, 2021). UNICEF (2017) reports that although Nigeria has a wealth of policies, their implementation could be better. Due to a lack of funding and political will, the government's ability and commitment to implementing educational policies

and procedures have been restricted. A lack of financing may negatively impact Nigeria's implementation of a program, as well as poor financial management and governance and limited capacity (Jacob & Samuel, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, education serves as a fundamental human right and a key driver of personal, economic, and societal advancement. Despite the significant reforms undertaken in Nigeria's education system, several barriers continue to impede its progress. These barriers include inadequate financing, widespread corruption, shortcomings in the curriculum, challenges in teacher training and support, weak educational leadership, infrastructure deficiencies, and a lack of political will. Addressing these barriers requires concerted efforts across various fronts. Advocating for increased government allocation towards education, diversifying funding sources, strengthening anti-corruption measures, improving the curriculum, enhancing teacher training and support, implementing merit-based leadership systems, and investing in infrastructure development are crucial steps towards overcoming these challenges. By addressing these barriers, Nigeria can strive towards a more equitable, inclusive, and effective education system that empowers its citizens and contributes to national development.

### **Recommendations**

To improve education financing in Nigeria, it's vital to advocate for increased government allocation, aiming for the UNESCO-recommended 26% of the budget. Diversifying funding sources through partnerships and donations and implementing stricter budget monitoring can combat corruption and ensure funds are used effectively.

To combat corruption in Nigeria's education sector, it's essential to strengthen anti-corruption measures by increasing government accountability and enforcing stricter penalties for financial misconduct. Promoting transparency through detailed budget allocations and expenditure reports can enhance public scrutiny and accountability.

To improve the curriculum in Nigeria, it's important to regularly review and revise it to align with current social and economic needs. Integrating Indigenous knowledge and local contents into the curriculum fosters cultural understanding and student engagement. Additionally, implementing multilingual teaching approaches, such as translanguaging, accommodates Nigeria's linguistic diversity and enhances student learning.

It's essential to increase investment in teacher training programs to equip educators with effective

pedagogy and skills for learner-centered education. Addressing factors like low pay and challenging work environments is crucial to retaining qualified teachers and attracting new talent. Additionally, providing continuous professional development opportunities ensures that teachers stay updated on new teaching methods and advancements.

To strengthen educational leadership in Nigeria, implementing a merit-based system for appointing educational administrators based on qualifications and experience, rather than political affiliations, is essential.

To improve infrastructure in Nigerian education, increasing investment from both government and private sectors is crucial to upgrade and expand facilities like classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and digital technology tools. Additionally, developing a comprehensive plan for the maintenance and upkeep of existing infrastructure ensures its functionality and longevity.

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