

POLICY PATHWAYS FOR INTEGRATING ADULT AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION INTO NIGERIAN SCHOOL CURRICULA

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Abstract

Nigeria's education system operates through divided governance structures that perpetuate exclusion for approximately 18.5 million out-of-school children and countless adults. This article examined the policy frameworks necessary to integrate adult and non-formal education into mainstream schooling, analysing institutional barriers, comparative models from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and viable reform pathways. Drawing on documentary analysis and policy review, the study identified three critical constraints: institutional fragmentation between the Universal Basic Education Commission and National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education; curriculum misalignment preventing learner mobility; and professional capacity deficits amongst educators. The analysis revealed that technical solutions remain inadequate without addressing the political economy of fragmentation that serves entrenched bureaucratic interests. The article proposed a phased reform strategy: immediate coordination mechanisms, medium-term curriculum equivalence, and long-term governance consolidation. These findings contribute to scholarly debates on lifelong learning systems in low-income contexts, demonstrating that integration requires simultaneous intervention across governance, pedagogy, and professional development domains.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, Non-formal Education, Curriculum Integration, Educational Governance, Nigeria, Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

The global commitment to inclusive education, articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 4, has intensified scrutiny of institutional arrangements that separate formal schooling from alternative learning pathways. In sub-Saharan Africa, where approximately 98 million children and adolescents remain out of school, this separation represents not merely administrative inefficiency but a fundamental governance failure that perpetuates educational exclusion (UNESCO, 2024). Nigeria exemplifies this crisis acutely: with over 18 million out-of-school children, the country's educational architecture reveals a stark tension between institutionalised formal schooling and the flexible provisions necessary for marginalised populations (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

Historically, Nigeria's educational governance has maintained structural separation between formal basic education, regulated by the Universal Basic Education Commission, and adult and non-formal education initiatives overseen by the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education. This institutional division has created fragmented governance mechanisms that limit the state's capacity to address literacy gaps through coherent, lifelong learning frameworks (Ajiye, 2022). The operational autonomy of the National Commission for Mass Literacy from formal school curricula restricts opportunities for continuity, particularly for out-of-school youth and adults requiring flexible re-entry into certified programmes (Nwoke et al., 2024). Consequently, Nigeria's educational landscape remains characterised by parallel systems that inadequately serve diverse learning needs, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and skills deficits (Jajere et al., 2025).

Contemporary policy discourse signals a potential shift. The Federal Ministry of Education's "Roadmap for the Nigerian Education Sector 2024–2027" articulates explicit objectives to reduce out-of-school populations by 15 million through Accelerated Basic Education Programme learning centres and open schooling schemes targeting 500,000 over-age learners annually (Federal Ministry of Education and UNESCO IIEP, 2023; Global Partnership for Education, 2024). This framework emphasizes integrating Almajiri and other non-formal structures into formal basic education, whilst incorporating foundational literacy into non-formal curricula. The revised *National Policy on Inclusive Education* (2023) further mandates curriculum adaptation and teacher training in sign language and Braille, alongside vocational skills integration (Federal Ministry of Education and UNESCO IIEP, 2023). These developments suggest an emerging policy consensus regarding the necessity of bridging formal and non-formal modalities.

However, aspirational policy documents frequently outpace implementation capacity. The coexistence of formal schooling and adult and non-formal education programmes requires coherent conceptual frameworks capable of guiding implementation whilst accommodating Nigeria's diverse sociocultural and geographic contexts (Okebukola, 2020). This article addresses this gap by analysing the policy and institutional frameworks necessary to operationalise integration. Specifically, it examines: (a) the governance structures required to overcome institutional fragmentation; (b) curricular innovations that enable learner mobility across formal and non-formal domains; and (c) professional development frameworks capable of supporting hybrid educational environments.

The analysis proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on lifelong learning theory and coordination mechanisms in fragmented governance contexts. Section 3 maps Nigeria's current policy landscape, identifying the structural drivers of institutional separation. Section 4 examines comparative models from Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, and Bangladesh, extracting transferable lessons. Section 5 diagnoses structural barriers to integration, whilst Section 6 proposes specific policy pathways. Section 7 addresses implementation considerations, and Section 8 concludes with prioritised recommendations.

Analytical Framework

Lifelong Learning as Governance Arrangement

Lifelong learning operates simultaneously as educational philosophy and governance challenge. As philosophy, it rejects the traditional view that education occurs only during specific life stages, instead supporting continuous skill development across formal, non-formal, and informal settings (Thwe and Kálmán, 2023). As governance arrangement, it requires institutional mechanisms capable of coordinating across sectors and connecting educational levels (Yunus, 2026).

The OECD (2023) characterises this as "seamless learning pathways", systems allowing learners to move between educational contexts without losing credit or status. Three elements enable such pathways: modular curricula design, portable qualifications frameworks, and flexible delivery methods (UNESCO, 2024). In low-income contexts, integration additionally requires recognising non-formal learning as equivalent to formal schooling, thereby enabling marginalised groups to access employment and further education (Rudling et al., 2025).

Nigeria faces specific challenges here. The country's dual system, with the Universal Basic Education Commission managing formal basic education whilst the National Commission for Mass Literacy oversees adult and non-formal provision, creates structural barriers preventing learner mobility between systems (Ajiye, 2022; Wami, 2024). Genuine integration demands more than curriculum alignment; it necessitates structural reforms unifying oversight, funding, and quality assurance across both domains.

Curriculum and Teacher Capacity Constraints

Curriculum misalignment presents a second major barrier. Formal schools follow the nine-year Basic Education Curriculum developed by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council. National Commission for Mass Literacy programmes use separate curricula developed for adult literacy and skills acquisition. The two share no common competency framework, credit transfer mechanism, or assessment standard (Ajiye, 2022).

This misalignment creates dead ends for learners. A child completing three years in a non-formal learning centre cannot transition into formal primary grade four without repeating years. An adult acquiring literacy through National Commission for Mass Literacy programmes gains no certification recognised for employment or further study. The systems operate as separate tracks rather than interconnected pathways, defeating lifelong learning objectives (Thwe and Kálmán, 2023).

Teacher capacity constraints compound curriculum problems. Formal school teachers train through university or college programmes, acquiring subject knowledge and pedagogical skills over three to four years. National Commission for Mass Literacy facilitators typically receive brief orientation, sometimes as little as two weeks, before deployment. They lack professional status, career progression, and instructional support available to formal school colleagues (Usman et al., 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these capacity gaps starkly. When schools closed, formal teachers struggled with remote delivery; National Commission for Mass Literacy facilitators, already operating with minimal resources, simply ceased provision. Neither group possessed digital competencies or flexible pedagogical skills to maintain learning

continuity. Post-pandemic recovery has not systematically addressed these deficiencies (Valverde-Berrocso et al., 2021).

Integration requires teachers capable of operating across boundaries: assessing prior learning regardless of setting, adapting instruction for mixed-age groups, and guiding learners through modular progression. Current pre-service and in-service programmes do not develop these capabilities. Teacher education remains organised around formal school assumptions, producing professionals unprepared for hybrid educational environments (Nakar et al., 2025; Macaro et al., 2020).

Policy Pathways

Governance Reconfiguration

Nigeria's institutional fragmentation is not merely administrative inefficiency but a politically constructed equilibrium serving vested interests. Three reconfiguration pathways present distinct trade-offs between technical optimality and political feasibility.

a) Consolidation Model

Merging the Universal Basic Education Commission and National Commission for Mass Literacy into a single Basic Education Commission would eliminate parallel structures and unify funding streams under the constitutionally protected 2 per cent Consolidated Revenue Fund. This offers maximum efficiency but confronts formidable obstacles: legislative amendment requirements, bureaucratic resistance, and loss of ministerial discretion. The 2024 proposal to increase Universal Basic Education Commission allocation to 4 per cent (House of Representatives, 2024) suggests reform appetite, but consolidation would require constitutional amendment, unlikely in Nigeria's current political climate.

b) Hybrid Coordination Model

Retaining separate agencies whilst establishing a joint policy council with binding arbitration authority over budget allocation and programme overlap preserves specialised expertise whilst mandating synchronised planning and interoperable data systems. The 2025 Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council and Universal Basic Education Commission strategic partnership for curriculum rollout demonstrates feasibility (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2025). However, without statutory enforcement, joint councils risk degenerating into consultative talking shops.

c) Devolution Model

Constitutional amendment transferring primary integration responsibility to states through unified State Basic Education Boards aligns with the 2024 Supreme Court judgment granting local governments direct Universal Basic Education Commission fund access (Guardian, 2026), potentially bypassing state-level obstruction. Yet devolution risks replicating fragmentation at subnational levels, particularly in fiscally constrained northern states where out-of-school concentrations are highest.

Governance reform must precede curriculum or teacher interventions. The 2024 Education Sector Expenditure Review reveals that whilst the Universal Basic Education Commission had disbursed N605.9 billion by 2023, N54.9 billion remained unallocated

because states failed to provide required matching funds (Federal Ministry of Education, 2024). This suggests the primary constraint is not funding availability but weak institutional capacity and limited political commitment. Any governance model should incorporate conditional financing requiring evidence of integration capacity before fund release.

Curriculum and Delivery Reforms

The 2025 Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council curriculum revision reduces subject overload and introduces vocational streams, creating integration opportunities. However, it maintains distinct learning tracks rather than adopting modular competency frameworks. Effective integration requires competency-based progression replacing rigid age-grade advancement, enabling learners entering from non-formal programmes to undergo prior learning assessment and receive credit for demonstrated competencies. Nigeria currently lacks infrastructure for prior learning assessment, trained assessors, and recognised certification mechanisms.

Delivery modality reform is equally critical. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed system rigidity: when schools closed, 18.5 million children lost access, and National Commission for Mass Literacy facilitators, lacking digital infrastructure, ceased operations entirely (UNICEF, 2024). Post-pandemic recovery has not systematically addressed this vulnerability. Hybrid delivery (face-to-face foundational instruction, digital reinforcement, community-based application) requires infrastructure investment, but more critically, pedagogical redesign enabling facilitators to navigate mixed-modal, multi-age instruction.

Curriculum alignment without assessment equivalence is meaningless. Current National Commission for Mass Literacy certification carries no weight for formal school admission or employment. The 2025 curriculum revision's emphasis on "trade subjects" (solar installation, garment making) offers potential bridging mechanisms if National Commission for Mass Literacy skills acquisition programmes can demonstrate equivalent competency standards through National Business and Technical Examinations Board assessment alignment.

Teacher Professional Development

The formal teacher and facilitator dichotomy constitutes an apartheid system perpetuating educational inequality. Colleges of Education and universities produce graduates prepared exclusively for formal classroom contexts, whilst National Commission for Mass Literacy facilitators receive minimal orientation without career progression pathways.

Pre-service restructuring must introduce dual-track preparation covering formal and non-formal pedagogies, prior learning assessment, and modular instruction. However, the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria professional standards remain silent on non-formal education competencies. Until the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria mandates cross-boundary training, institutions lack incentive to reform.

In-service bridging through collaborative professional learning communities offers immediate viability. The 2025 Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council and Universal Basic Education Commission partnership include "nationwide sensitization and teacher capacity-building" (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2025), but historical patterns suggest these are one-off training cascades rather than sustained

communities. Effective professional learning communities require: (a) structured time allocation within school calendars; (b) peer observation protocols; (c) external expert facilitation; and (d) linkage to career advancement; none currently exist.

Career architecture unification requires elevating facilitator status through certification, licensure, and defined progression ladders. This confronts the political economy of teacher unions, which resist dilution of professional status through facilitator inclusion.

Teacher capacity constraints are symptomatic of deeper system failures. The 2024 Education Sector Review notes 47 million enrolments across basic education levels, with only 71 per cent in public schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2024). With facilitator deployment concentrated in underserved areas, integration would require massive professionalisation investment for marginal political returns.

Implementation Considerations

Financing and Political Economy

Integration confronts a political economy of fragmentation. Current arrangements serve multiple interests: federal ministers retain discretion over National Commission for Mass Literacy budgets; state commissioners control Universal Basic Education Commission fund flows; local officials benefit from procurement opacity. Consolidation threatens these rent-seeking opportunities.

Financing mechanisms must work within this constraint structure:

Ring-fenced integration fund. Rather than attempting full consolidation, establish a dedicated fund (potentially 0.5 per cent of Consolidated Revenue Fund) specifically for transition programming: prior learning assessment systems, bridge courses, facilitator upskilling. This creates constituencies with vested interest in integration success.

Results-based financing. Tie disbursements to measurable integration outcomes: transition rates from National Commission for Mass Literacy to formal schools, credit transfer volumes, completion equivalencies. The World Bank's Better Education Service Delivery for All programme demonstrates this approach, though results have been mixed due to weak verification systems.

Private sector levies. Target industries benefiting from workforce literacy (construction, agriculture, services) through statutory training levies. This reduces fiscal burden whilst aligning education supply with labour demand.

The 2024 proposal to increase Universal Basic Education Commission allocation to 4 per cent reflects recognition that 2 per cent is insufficient, yet the political economy of federal transfers suggests additional funds will be absorbed by existing programmes rather than integration initiatives. Any increase should be conditional on demonstrated integration capacity.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Nigeria's implementation environment, characterised by fiscal volatility, security challenges, and bureaucratic opacity, demands adaptive management rather than rigid blueprint implementation.

Real-time data systems. Current Universal Basic Education Commission school censuses and National Commission for Mass Literacy community surveys are annual, paper-based, and

non-interoperable. Integration requires dynamic information systems tracking learner mobility across formal and non-formal boundaries. The 2025 Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council digital literacy curriculum offers foundational skills for such systems, but infrastructure (electricity, connectivity, devices) remains prohibitive in target areas.

Embedded implementation research. Rather than ex-post evaluations, integrate research teams within rollout to generate rapid evidence on what works where. Given Nigeria's heterogeneity (Kano's 4.1 million enrolments versus Ekiti's minimal numbers), national models require local adaptation.

Political risk mitigation. Phased pilots in politically willing states (e.g., those with functional State Mass Education Boards) can generate demonstration effects. The 2024 local government autonomy judgment creates opportunities for subnational experimentation bypassing state-level obstruction (Guardian, 2026).

Adaptive management is institutionally alien to Nigeria's education bureaucracy, which operates on annual planning cycles and input-based monitoring. Building adaptive capacity requires dedicated technical assistance and political protection for "learning by doing", scarce commodities in a sector characterised by high staff turnover and low institutional memory.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria's bifurcated basic education architecture perpetuates educational exclusion for approximately 18.5 million out-of-school children and uncounted adults. This analysis demonstrates that structural barriers are not technical oversights but politically embedded institutional choices serving specific interests. Integration requires simultaneous intervention across governance, curriculum, and teacher professional development; partial reform will produce partial failure.

The comparative analysis reveals that successful integration elsewhere has relied on three elements: clear transition pathways with qualification equivalence, boundary organisations bridging formal and non-formal domains, and sustained political commitment backed by conditional financing. Nigeria currently lacks all three

Priority Recommendations

Immediate (0–12 months): Establish a statutory joint Universal Basic Education Commission and National Commission for Mass Literacy coordination council with binding authority over planning synchronisation and data harmonisation, backed by conditional financing requiring interoperability as fund access prerequisite. Pilot prior learning assessment and credit transfer mechanisms in three states with functional State Mass Education Boards, using the 2025 curriculum revision as entry point.

Medium-term (1–3 years): Mandate Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria revision of professional standards to include non-formal education competencies, requiring Colleges of Education to introduce dual-track pre-service preparation. Implement results-based financing for integration outcomes, with verification through unified information systems.

Long-term (3–5 years): Pursue constitutional amendment consolidating the Universal Basic Education Commission and National Commission for Mass Literacy into a single Basic

Education Commission, extending 2 per cent Consolidated Revenue Fund protection to all foundational learning. Establish national assessment equivalence between National Commission for Mass Literacy certification and formal school qualifications through National Business and Technical Examinations Board alignment.

Limitations and Future Research

This analysis relies primarily on documentary sources and policy review. Future research should incorporate primary data from state-level implementation, particularly regarding the political economy of reform resistance. Additionally, the effectiveness of specific integration mechanisms, such as prior learning assessment and professional learning communities, requires empirical testing in the Nigerian context.

Final Observation

Without addressing the political economy of fragmentation, where multiple actors benefit from institutional multiplicity, technical recommendations will remain aspirational. The 2024 local government autonomy judgment and proposed Universal Basic Education Commission allocation increase create a reform window, but this requires executive-level political commitment that has been absent in recent administrations. Whether Nigeria's current policy trajectory represents genuine transformation or merely rhetorical repositioning will be determined not by the quality of policy documents, but by the willingness of political actors to dismantle the very fragmentation from which many currently benefit.

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