

RECONCEPTUALISING NIGERIA'S NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION

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Abstract

The National Policy on Education (NPE) in Nigeria constitutes the central policy architecture guiding educational development, governance, and reform. Although it is anchored on a strong philosophical vision of education for national development, persistent systemic inefficiencies suggest deep structural limitations in its design logic, implementation capacity, and responsiveness to contemporary global education dynamics. This paper critically interrogates these limitations through three analytical lenses: policy design deficiencies, implementation constraints, and system misalignments. Drawing on contemporary policy analysis frameworks and recent empirical literature, the paper argues that the NPE is weakened by insufficient operationalisation mechanisms, fragmented governance structures, weak accountability systems, and inadequate alignment with twenty-first century skills imperatives. The paper concludes by proposing a reconceptualised policy architecture grounded in adaptive governance, performance-based financing, strengthened data ecosystems, and integrated stakeholder participation to enhance effectiveness, resilience, and sustainability.

Keywords: National Policy on Education, Policy Design, Implementation Gap, Education Governance, Nigeria, system Misalignment

Introduction

Education policy remains a strategic instrument for national transformation, particularly in developing economies where human capital development is central to economic competitiveness and social stability. In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education represents the formal blueprint for educational planning, administration, and delivery across all levels of schooling. Despite successive revisions, the education system continues to experience persistent structural challenges, including low learning outcomes, infrastructural decay, teacher quality deficits, and governance inefficiencies. These persistent issues suggest that the problem extends beyond implementation failure to deeper systemic weaknesses embedded within the policy architecture itself.

Contemporary policy analysis emphasises that effective policy systems must demonstrate coherence between design intent, implementation capacity, and environmental responsiveness. Within this context, this paper argues that the Nigerian NPE exhibits three interrelated weaknesses: design deficiencies, implementation constraints, and systemic misalignment with evolving educational and socio-economic realities.

This paper is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: the policy cycle model and systems theory. The policy cycle model, as articulated by Howlett and Ramesh (2003), conceptualises policy development as a sequential process involving agenda-setting, formulation, implementation, evaluation, and revision. Breakdown at any stage generates systemic inefficiencies that compromise overall policy outcomes.

Systems theory, on the other hand, conceptualises education as an interdependent structure comprising inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). System performance is therefore contingent on alignment across all subsystems, including governance, financing, curriculum, and assessment mechanisms. Together, these frameworks provide a structured lens for interrogating the NPE across three analytical domains: design structure, implementation processes, and systemic coherence.

Policy Design Deficiencies

The structural integrity of any education policy is fundamentally determined by the coherence of its design logic, the robustness of its financing framework, the strength of its monitoring architecture, and the extent to which it anticipates technological and equity demands within the system. Within the Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE), multiple layers of design insufficiencies interact to produce systemic fragility. These deficiencies are not isolated technical gaps but interdependent structural weaknesses that cumulatively reduce policy effectiveness, weaken accountability mechanisms, and constrain institutional performance across all levels of the education system.

Absence of Coherent Policy Logic: A foundational limitation of the NPE is the absence of a clearly articulated and operationalised theory of change. Although the policy document provides broad philosophical objectives, it does not establish a rigorous causal pathway linking policy inputs, institutional processes, outputs, and long-term educational outcomes. In contemporary policy science, this linkage is essential for ensuring that policy ambition is translated into measurable system performance indicators.

The implication of this absence is significant. Without a structured logic model, policy implementation becomes fragmented, with actors interpreting objectives in inconsistent and context-dependent ways. This weakens vertical accountability between policy formulation bodies and implementing agencies, while simultaneously undermining horizontal coordination across institutions. OECD (2021) emphasises that high-performing education systems are characterised by explicit policy coherence, where objectives are operationalised into measurable indicators and systematically aligned with governance and financing structures. In contrast, fragmented policy logic, as observed in the Nigerian context, produces what can be described as “implementation drift,” where institutional actors pursue divergent interpretations of the same policy framework.

Furthermore, the absence of a coherent policy logic reduces the capacity for evidence-based evaluation. Without clearly defined outcome indicators and causal pathways, monitoring systems cannot accurately determine whether observed outcomes result from policy interventions or external contextual factors. This creates an accountability vacuum in which policy effectiveness becomes difficult to measure, attribute, or improve.

Financing Architecture Weakness: The financing structure underpinning the NPE represents one of its most critical design vulnerabilities. Education financing in Nigeria is characterised by volatility, discretionary budgetary allocations, and weak legal enforcement of funding commitments. This creates a structural misalignment between policy ambition and financial sustainability. A robust education system requires a predictable and protected financing framework that insulates educational investment from political and macroeconomic fluctuations. However, the Nigerian model remains heavily dependent on annual budget negotiations, which are often influenced by competing fiscal priorities and revenue constraints. This introduces uncertainty into long-term planning processes and undermines institutional continuity.

Agbai et al. (2021) argue that sustainable education financing is a central determinant of system performance, particularly in developing economies where resource scarcity intensifies trade-offs between sectors. In the absence of binding fiscal commitments, education systems tend to experience recurrent underinvestment in critical areas such as infrastructure development, teacher training, and instructional materials. From a systems perspective, financing instability produces cascading inefficiencies. Schools are unable to plan effectively, recruitment cycles become irregular, and infrastructure projects remain incomplete or abandoned. Over time, this contributes to structural inequities between regions and school types, particularly between urban and rural institutions. Moreover, the absence of a legally enforceable financing threshold limits fiscal accountability. Unlike systems where education expenditure is constitutionally or legislatively protected, Nigeria's discretionary model exposes the sector to political prioritisation cycles, thereby weakening its long-term developmental trajectory.

Weak Monitoring and Evaluation Systems: Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) constitute the feedback mechanisms through which education systems assess performance, identify inefficiencies, and implement corrective reforms. Within the NPE framework, however, M&E structures remain underdeveloped, fragmented, and weakly institutionalised. The absence of a comprehensive M&E architecture limits the ability of policymakers to track system performance in real time. In many instances, evaluation occurs post hoc, often after significant inefficiencies have already accumulated within the system. This reactive approach contrasts sharply with adaptive governance models, where continuous data collection informs iterative policy adjustment.

World Bank (2018) underscores the importance of robust education management information systems (EMIS) as foundational infrastructure for evidence-based policymaking. In the Nigerian context, existing data systems are often characterised by incomplete datasets, delayed reporting, and weak integration across administrative levels.

The implications of this deficiency are multidimensional. First, it weakens accountability, as performance outcomes cannot be systematically linked to specific policy interventions or

institutional actors. Second, it reduces transparency, limiting the ability of stakeholders to assess system effectiveness. Third, it constrains adaptive learning, as policymakers lack the granular data required to adjust strategies in response to emerging challenges. In effect, the absence of a strong M&E framework transforms policy implementation into a linear rather than cyclical process, thereby undermining the principles of continuous improvement that underpin modern education governance systems.

Digital Transformation Gaps: The global education landscape is undergoing rapid transformation driven by digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and blended learning systems. In this context, the integration of digital technologies into education policy is no longer optional but foundational to system competitiveness and resilience. Although the NPE acknowledges the importance of information and communication technology (ICT), it lacks a comprehensive and operational digital transformation strategy. This results in fragmented implementation characterised by uneven adoption across regions and institutions. Baidoo-Anu et al. (2023) highlight that digital inequality remains a major barrier to equitable education access in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, this challenge is compounded by infrastructural deficits such as unreliable electricity supply, limited internet penetration, and inadequate access to digital devices in public schools. The absence of a coherent digital strategy produces structural inefficiencies. Schools in urban areas tend to adopt digital tools at a faster rate, while rural and underserved regions remain excluded from digital learning ecosystems. This deepens existing inequalities and undermines national cohesion in education delivery.

Furthermore, the lack of integration between digital policy and curriculum reform limits the pedagogical potential of technology. Digital tools are often used as supplementary instruments rather than as embedded components of instructional design. This reduces their transformative impact on teaching and learning outcomes. From a policy design perspective, this gap reflects a broader failure to anticipate the structural implications of technological change within education systems. Without a comprehensive digital framework, the education system remains reactive rather than proactive in addressing technological disruption.

Weak Inclusion Mechanisms: Equity and inclusion are central principles of modern education systems. However, within the NPE framework, inclusion mechanisms remain conceptually acknowledged but operationally underdeveloped.

While the policy articulates commitments to inclusive education, it lacks detailed implementation strategies for addressing the needs of marginalised groups, including learners with disabilities, girls in rural areas, and children in conflict-affected regions. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that genuine inclusion requires education systems to move beyond rhetorical commitment toward concrete mechanisms, including disaggregated data collection, targeted resourcing, and accountability structures that ensure no learner is excluded on the basis of identity or circumstance.

This absence of operational specificity results in uneven implementation across different contexts. In practice, inclusion initiatives are often project-based, donor-driven, and geographically limited, rather than systematically embedded within the national education framework.

The consequence is persistent inequality in access, participation, and learning outcomes. Marginalised groups continue to face structural barriers that limit their educational progression, thereby reinforcing cycles of social and economic disadvantage.

From a systems governance perspective, effective inclusion requires targeted financing, specialised teacher training, infrastructure adaptation, and continuous monitoring mechanisms. The absence of these components within the NPE reflects a design-level deficiency that limits the policy's capacity to deliver equitable outcomes.

In addition, the lack of strong inclusion architecture undermines Nigeria's commitment to international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which emphasise inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners.

Collectively, the identified deficiencies reveal a pattern of structural fragmentation within the NPE. The absence of coherent policy logic undermines accountability, financing instability weakens sustainability, weak monitoring systems reduce adaptability, digital gaps constrain modernisation, and weak inclusion mechanisms perpetuate inequality. These deficiencies are mutually reinforcing rather than independent. For instance, weak financing exacerbates digital exclusion, while weak monitoring systems prevent the identification of inclusion gaps. Together, they produce a systemic environment characterised by inefficiency, inequality, and limited responsiveness. From a systems theory perspective, these design weaknesses indicate a misalignment between policy architecture and system functionality. As a result, the education system operates below its potential capacity, despite the presence of strong policy intentions.

Implementation Constraints

Governance Fragmentation: Nigeria's education governance architecture is structurally decentralised, with responsibilities distributed across federal, state, and local government authorities. While decentralisation is theoretically designed to enhance responsiveness and local ownership, empirical evidence suggests that in contexts with weak coordination capacity, it often produces fragmentation, duplication of functions, and policy incoherence.

In Nigeria, this fragmentation manifests in inconsistent policy interpretation, uneven teacher recruitment standards, and divergent implementation priorities across states. As a result, national policy directives are frequently adapted or selectively implemented at subnational levels, leading to significant spatial inequality in education quality and access.

De Grauwe (2009) argues that decentralised education systems require strong institutional capacity, accountability, and support structures to function effectively. Without these mechanisms, decentralisation tends to weaken rather than strengthen system coherence, particularly in low-capacity governance environments. Similarly, the OECD (2021) emphasises that high-performing education systems maintain a balance between decentralised delivery and centralised strategic steering, ensuring alignment of standards and outcomes across jurisdictions.

This pattern of governance fragmentation weakens institutional coherence and reduces the effectiveness of national education policy implementation, particularly where administrative coordination mechanisms are weak or inconsistently enforced, reinforcing what can be

described as “policy drift,” where national intent diverges significantly from subnational execution. In Nigeria’s case, the absence of robust intergovernmental coordination mechanisms results in what can be described as “implementation asymmetry,” where policy intent is nationally uniform but operational outcomes are regionally differentiated.

Financing Volatility: Education financing in Nigeria remains highly sensitive to macroeconomic fluctuations, revenue instability, and competing fiscal priorities. Budgetary allocations are often subject to annual political negotiation rather than long-term statutory guarantees, resulting in unpredictability in fund disbursement and project execution.

This volatility undermines strategic planning in key areas such as infrastructure development, teacher recruitment, and instructional material provision. Schools and education agencies frequently experience delayed releases of approved funds, leading to incomplete projects and disrupted academic programmes.

The World Bank (2018) identifies unpredictable financing as a major constraint in developing education systems, noting that stable and multi-year funding frameworks are essential for improving learning outcomes and institutional resilience. Likewise, UNESCO (2023) stresses that sustained investment is a prerequisite for achieving equitable access and quality education under Sustainable Development Goal 4. In Nigeria, the absence of a legally binding education financing framework exacerbates systemic vulnerability, as allocations remain subject to fiscal shocks and policy re-prioritisation. This produces cyclical underinvestment, particularly in rural and underserved regions, thereby reinforcing structural inequality.

Human Resource Deficits: Teacher availability, distribution, and quality remain critical determinants of education system performance. In Nigeria, persistent shortages of qualified teachers, particularly in STEM disciplines, significantly constrain instructional effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Beyond numerical shortages, systemic challenges include inadequate pre-service preparation, limited access to continuous professional development, and weak performance evaluation mechanisms. These factors collectively reduce instructional quality and hinder pedagogical innovation.

The OECD (2021) underscores that teacher effectiveness is the single most important school-based factor influencing student achievement. High-performing systems invest heavily in continuous professional learning, structured mentoring, and competency-based evaluation systems. In contrast, systems with weak professional development structures tend to experience stagnation in instructional quality and limited adaptability to curriculum reforms.

Furthermore, inequitable distribution of teachers between urban and rural schools exacerbates educational disparities. Rural and conflict-affected regions are particularly disadvantaged, with higher pupil–teacher ratios and lower access to qualified subject specialists.

Weak Data Systems: Reliable data systems are essential for evidence-based planning, accountability, and adaptive governance. However, Nigeria’s Education Management Information System (EMIS) remains fragmented, underfunded, and inconsistently implemented across states.

Key challenges include delayed reporting cycles, incomplete datasets, and weak interoperability between federal and subnational data systems. These limitations significantly reduce the capacity of policymakers to monitor enrolment trends, learning outcomes, teacher distribution, and infrastructure needs in real time.

The World Bank (2018) highlights that weak data ecosystems in education systems result in reactive policymaking and inefficient resource allocation. Without timely and disaggregated data, governments are unable to identify performance gaps or target interventions effectively.

UNESCO (2023) further emphasises that robust digital data infrastructures are central to modern education governance, enabling predictive analytics, system accountability, and continuous improvement.

Systemic Misalignment

Curriculum–Labour Market Disconnect: A major structural challenge within Nigeria’s education system is the persistent mismatch between curricular content and labour market demands. The current curriculum framework remains heavily examination-oriented, with limited emphasis on applied competencies such as problem-solving, critical thinking, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial skills. This misalignment contributes to high levels of graduate underemployment and skill mismatches in the labour market. Employers frequently report gaps between academic qualifications and workplace competencies, particularly in technical and digital sectors.

UNESCO (2023) argues that education systems must transition from content-based to competency-based frameworks that align learning outcomes with evolving economic and technological demands. Similarly, the OECD (2021) highlights the importance of aligning education systems with labour market intelligence to ensure relevance and employability of graduates. In Nigeria, the weak integration between curriculum development and labour market planning limits the contribution of education to national productivity and economic diversification.

Weak Integration with National Development Planning: Education policy in Nigeria remains insufficiently integrated with broader national development frameworks, including industrial policy, economic planning, and workforce development strategies. This disconnect reduces the effectiveness of education as a tool for economic transformation. Ideally, education systems should function as pipelines for national development by producing skills aligned with industrial priorities and innovation agendas.

However, the absence of strong institutional linkages between education authorities and economic planning agencies results in fragmented human capital development. This weak alignment limits the strategic contribution of education to industrialisation, technological advancement, and national competitiveness.

The World Bank (2018) emphasises that countries that successfully align education systems with economic planning and labour market needs achieve higher productivity growth and reduced skills mismatches in the labour market.

Security Disruptions: Insecurity has become a significant systemic constraint affecting education delivery in several regions of Nigeria, particularly in the North-East and North-West zones. Armed conflict, insurgency, and communal violence have resulted in school closures, displacement of learners, and destruction of educational infrastructure. These disruptions have long-term consequences, including learning loss, increased dropout rates, and reduced educational attainment among affected populations. Saadiya and Jafaru (2025) found that conflict-related school closures and insecurity in Kaduna State significantly reduced school attendance and increased dropout rates, with families nearer conflict zones substantially less likely to maintain regular attendance. Children in conflict-affected areas are particularly vulnerable to educational exclusion, which further entrenches regional inequality.

The World Bank (2018) and UNESCO (2023) both highlight that education systems in conflict-affected environments experience prolonged recovery periods and require targeted resilience strategies, including safe school initiatives and psychosocial support systems.

Despite policy recognition of insecurity challenges, implementation responses in Nigeria remain fragmented and under-resourced.

Digital Divide: The expansion of digital technologies in education has introduced new dimensions of inequality, particularly in developing countries. In Nigeria, significant disparities exist between urban and rural schools in access to electricity, internet connectivity, and digital learning infrastructure.

This digital divide limits the effectiveness of technology-enhanced learning and reinforces existing socio-economic inequalities. Schools in urban centres are more likely to integrate digital tools into teaching and learning processes, while rural schools remain largely excluded from digital education ecosystems.

Baidoo-Anu et al. (2023) demonstrate that digital exclusion significantly reduces educational participation and learning outcomes in developing contexts. Similarly, UNESCO (2023) emphasises that equitable digital infrastructure is essential for inclusive education systems in the twenty-first century.

Without targeted investment in digital infrastructure and teacher digital literacy, technology-driven reforms risk widening rather than narrowing educational inequalities.

Policy Responsiveness and adaptive capacity

Weak Adaptive Governance Structures: Modern education systems require adaptive governance mechanisms capable of continuous learning, feedback integration, and iterative reform. However, Nigeria's education policy environment remains largely static and bureaucratic. Policy revision processes are often slow, irregular, and disconnected from real-time system performance data. The OECD (2021) notes that high-performing systems sustain adaptive capacity through institutionalised feedback mechanisms linking classroom-level data to national policy review cycles, a feature largely absent from the Nigerian context. This limits the ability of policymakers to respond effectively to emerging challenges such as technological disruption and labour market shifts.

Absence of Real-Time Feedback Systems: Effective adaptive systems rely on continuous feedback loops linking schools, local authorities, and national policymakers. In Nigeria, such systems are weak or non-functional. The absence of real-time data integration results in delayed policy responses and limited system responsiveness. UNESCO (2023) emphasises that adaptive education systems must integrate data analytics, digital monitoring tools, and stakeholder feedback mechanisms.

Global Competitiveness and Policy Lag: The rapid evolution of global education systems, particularly in artificial intelligence, digital pedagogy, and competency-based learning, requires agile policy frameworks. UNESCO (2023) cautions that the pace of technological change in education is outstripping the capacity of national policy frameworks to regulate and harness it equitably. Nigeria's current system demonstrates significant lag in adapting to these global shifts. This creates a competitiveness gap, limiting the country's ability to fully participate in the global knowledge economy.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Nigeria's National Policy on Education suffers from deep structural limitations that extend beyond implementation failure. The core issues include weak policy design logic, fragmented governance systems, unstable financing structures, and systemic misalignment with socio-economic realities. A reconceptualised education policy framework is therefore required. Such a framework must be grounded in systems thinking, enforceable financing mechanisms, integrated digital governance, and adaptive policy learning systems. Without these structural reforms, incremental policy adjustments will continue to produce limited impact on educational outcomes and national development.

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