

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS ON NIGERIA'S ECONOMY

BY

¹ Simon Godfrey Soban, ²Umar Isah Baba, ³Suleiman Isa Ahmad ⁴ Joseph Ali

¹ Department of political science Taraba State College of education zing, Nigeria.

² Department of political science Taraba State College of education zing, Nigeria

³ Department of political science Taraba State College of education zing, Nigeria.

⁴ Department of political science Taraba State College of education zing, Nigeria.

Corresponding author: ¹ Simon Godfrey Soban

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Abstract

Nigeria's quest for sustainable economic development has long been tied to the strength and effectiveness of its educational system. Education is widely recognized as the cornerstone of human capital development and a driver of social and economic progress. However, despite numerous policies designed to reform and expand access to education since independence, the country continues to face persistent challenges that weaken their impact. This study examines the link between educational policies and Nigeria's economic development, with a focus on how gaps in policy implementation undermine progress. The paper traces the historical evolution of educational policies in Nigeria, from pre-colonial indigenous systems to the colonial introduction of Western education, post-independence reforms, and recent policy shifts such as the Universal Basic Education program. It highlights the frequent changes in policies and governments, chronic underfunding, poor infrastructure, outdated curricula, and weak quality assurance mechanisms that have contributed to policy failures. Evidence shows that while education is intended to provide skilled manpower, foster innovation, and drive entrepreneurship, the disconnect between policy design and execution has limited its contribution to national growth. The findings reveal that effective policy implementation, consistent funding, and alignment of curricula with labor market demands are essential for transforming education into a catalyst for sustainable development. The study concludes that unless Nigeria prioritizes continuity, accountability, and adequate investment in its educational policies, the sector will remain unable to deliver the economic transformation the nation urgently needs.

Keywords: Policy, Reform, Economy, Educational, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria has grappled with multiple challenges over the years. Oguejiofor (2004) noted that beyond geographical limits and the colonial amalgamation that hindered stability and unity, issues such as religious conflict, urban kidnappings, cybercrime among unemployed youths, Boko Haram insurgency, and rising unemployment persist. Achebe (1983) argued that Nigeria's real problem is leadership, stressing the need for visionary leaders who not only design educational policies but also possess the will to implement them for national progress.

Policy implementation remains a major obstacle to Nigeria's development. Many educational reforms fail during execution. Policymakers often assume that once adopted, policies will succeed automatically. Yet, little thought goes into the complex factors needed for success, leaving a wide gap between intentions and outcomes.

For Nigeria to grow, effective education policies must be both formulated and implemented. Unfortunately, evidence shows limited progress, as the country still lingers among the world's least developed nations. Political interference,

administrative hurdles, and corruption frequently derail reforms. These failures shifted global focus during the UN's second development plan in the 1970s from policy design to policy feasibility, prompting the creation of models to help nations like Nigeria understand implementation challenges (Egonmwan, 2009).

Conceptual Clarification

Policy

A policy ensures every organizational action has a guiding basis. Terry (1977:1989) defined it as an overall guide providing limits and direction for administrative actions without prescribing exact decisions. Policies link objectives to organizational functions, promote consistency, and discourage deviations. They should be flexible, allowing adjustments when necessary. Hoy and Miskel (1978) emphasized that policies must be formulated, communicated, monitored, and reviewed. Lindblom (1959) described policymaking as successive approximations toward changing goals, noting that no policy achieves total success. Even well-crafted policies face imperfections in practice.

Educational Policy

Educational policies are officially agreed frameworks guiding decisions in education. They include principles, laws, and rules governing the sector (Ololube, 2018; Ololube et al., 2016). Since government authorities craft these policies, they reflect political processes and often affect society broadly (Alasomuka & Ololube, 2020).

Basu (2006) highlighted features of public policy:

- i. It is purposeful and result-driven.
- ii. It carries legal authority and is binding.
- iii. It may be positive (government action) or negative (government inaction).
- iv. It reflects patterns of decisions over time.

Educational policy typically follows stages: goal formulation, problem identification, agenda setting, adoption, execution, and evaluation.

Nigeria began shaping functional education after independence in 1960. A national council created in 1964 conducted intensive research for reforms. The 1969 curriculum conference—though disrupted by civil war—eventually produced the National Policy on Education, which aimed at building a democratic, just, united, and self-reliant nation with a dynamic economy (NPE, 2014). Agabi (2002) observed that such policies mirror the values and ideology of governments in power.

Education and Economic Growth

Education has no single universal definition, as its meaning varies across cultures and societies (Todaro & Stephen, 1982). Ukeje (2002) described education as a process, a product, and a discipline. As a process, it involves

transferring the values, ideas, and norms of society from one generation to another. As a product, it is measured by the qualities and behavior of the educated person, often seen as knowledgeable and cultured. As a discipline, education refers to organized knowledge and the benefits students gain from it.

The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004) outlined aims such as building a free, just, and democratic society; creating opportunities for all citizens; fostering a strong and self-reliant nation; and supporting a dynamic economy. Many agree that if Nigeria's education system were more functional, it would produce positive changes that could accelerate development. Maintaining high educational standards is therefore essential for achieving these national goals.

Olaofe (2005) argued that the declining quality of education in Nigeria is largely due to the learning environment. He described schools with overcrowded classrooms, a ratio of one textbook to twelve students, dilapidated buildings, and teachers who are scarcely more competent than their pupils as a mockery of education. To improve standards, the problems rooted in the learning environment must be urgently addressed.

Haller (2012) explained economic growth as the process of expanding national economies and improving macroeconomic indicators like GDP per capita. Growth is typically upward, though not always linear, and produces positive social and economic impacts. Growth can be positive, zero, or negative. Positive growth occurs when the rise in macroeconomic indicators surpasses population growth. Zero growth arises when both rates are equal. Negative growth occurs when population growth outpaces the economy's indicators.

Educational Policies and Nigerian Economic Development

Uju and Joy (2014) defined socio-economic development as the process of identifying both social and economic needs within a community and creating strategies to address them in ways that have long-term impact. Education is the most powerful tool for enhancing human capacity and achieving socio-economic goals. It empowers people to make informed decisions, expand opportunities, and actively participate in public life. Through educational policies, Nigeria fosters growth and social transformation (Eze, 2003). Education policy provides the framework for development and lays the foundation for economic and social wellbeing. Globally, education is seen as central to economic transformation and social progress (Ismail, 2003). Properly implemented policies not only provide skilled human capital but also generate the technological knowledge necessary for economic advancement.

Ebong (2016) described educational policy as a framework for both human and societal growth. Effective implementation increases efficiency, productivity, and social

stability. By raising the value of labor, it reduces poverty and boosts competitiveness in global markets characterized by changing technologies. Without strong policy execution, no nation can sustain meaningful development. Nigeria's current educational policies emphasize creativity, entrepreneurship, and technological innovation, recognizing skills that can raise both individual and national prosperity. Civic education within these policies also strengthens social cohesion and citizen engagement.

Alhaz and Abbas (2010) argued that education positively influences both short- and long-term growth by improving living standards and producing responsible citizens. Quality education creates positive social spillovers, meaning the overall national income rises even beyond individual benefits. In developing countries like Nigeria, this belief in education as a force for change has fueled heavy investment and emphasized manpower development. Demand for higher education reflects society's perception of the financial and social rewards it brings. Expanding education, therefore, is widely associated with promoting economic growth.

Expected Economic Contributions Of Educational Policy Implementation

Implementing educational policy enables young graduates to gain relevant training and develop a positive attitude toward productive work in their chosen fields.

It also helps citizens understand and promote organizational goals. When policy is well executed, individuals are better able to align with the objectives of institutions they belong to and contribute meaningfully.

Another contribution is building self-reliance and competence. By equipping individuals with practical skills, policy implementation reduces dependence on scarce job opportunities and encourages self-employment. Skill development through education makes self-sufficiency a realistic option.

Implementation further creates a balanced and capable human resource base by ensuring every citizen has the opportunity to engage productively. With the right environment, people can maximize their potential through education, training, and motivation, all of which feed into national development.

Finally, policy execution strengthens moral values. One of education's core aims is to shape citizens with strong ethical standards, and implementing these policies reinforces the moral fabric of society.

Historical Evolution of Educational Policies in Nigeria

The evolution of educational policies in Nigeria reflects the influence of colonial legacies, independence reforms, political shifts, and economic realities. From pre-colonial times to the present, education has been seen as vital for

empowerment, unity, and progress. Tracing this history involves reviewing key stages, challenges, and policy shifts.

In the pre-colonial era, education was informal and oral, focused on teaching practical skills, cultural values, and community norms. Each ethnic group maintained its own indigenous learning system (Fafunwa, 2018; Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019).

During the colonial period, Western education spread through missionaries in the south and later through British administration. It mainly served colonial needs by training clerks, interpreters, and low-level officials. The 1882 Education Ordinance became the first formal policy, promoting Western education while sidelining indigenous systems (Fafunwa, 2018; Oluwalola et al., 2022). Its primary aim was to create an educated elite to sustain colonial governance and commerce.

After independence in 1960, Nigeria sought reforms to expand access, reduce disparities, and promote unity. The 1969 National Curriculum Conference positioned education as a tool for justice and national growth. It called for free compulsory primary education, adult literacy, and stronger vocational training, leading to the first National Policy on Education (Birabil & Ogeh, 2020). Expansion of institutions followed, though challenges of funding, facilities, and equity remained.

In the 1980s, economic hardship and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) reshaped education. SAP promoted fiscal austerity, deregulation, and reduced government spending. This led to declining infrastructure, underfunded public schools, and rising private institutions, deepening inequalities (Molokwu et al., 2022).

Since the 21st century, reforms have continued. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, launched in 1999, guaranteed nine years of free compulsory education. ICT policies and vocational training initiatives aimed to align learning with modern needs (Nweke et al., 2022). Yet funding gaps, outdated curricula, and regional inequalities persist. The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed weak capacity for remote learning, stressing the need for resilient systems.

Overall, Nigeria's education history shows progress but also setbacks. Colonial priorities, post-independence hopes, and modern realities have shaped its policies. Sustained funding, innovation, and partnerships are crucial to unlock education's role in national development.

Frequent Changes in Educational Policies and Programs

Nigeria has undergone numerous reforms, reviews, and innovations in education, but frequent changes and inconsistencies have weakened standards. Constant shifts in policies often disrupt progress and limit long-term impact. Obukoya (2015) noted that between 2000 and 2016, Nigeria experienced five different regimes, each bringing its own

vision for education. From Babangida to Shonekan in 1993, Abacha (1993–1998), Abubakar (1998–1999), and Obasanjo (1999–2007), the country saw several ministers, governors, and commissioners, each with differing approaches. This lack of continuity bred inconsistencies that remain today.

Frequent modifications, such as the introduction of UPE, UBE, and systems like 6-5-4, 6-3-3-4, and 9-3-4, illustrate the instability. These shifts are usually accompanied by new frameworks, proposals, and declarations, but often without lasting results. The unpredictability of what policy may emerge next highlights the lack of steady direction. Such constant changes hinder meaningful development and create confusion within the sector.

Impact of Educational Policies in Nigeria

Several studies highlight the persistent problems affecting policy implementation in Nigeria’s education sector. Ogunode and Adah (2020) identified issues such as poor funding, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified teachers, corruption, weak political will, insecurity, poor commitment, unstable politics, and a lack of coordination between policy designers and implementers.

Similarly, Joel, Ogi, and Ikpe (2019) pointed out that insufficient funding and policy inconsistencies remain central challenges. They also observed problems like incompetent staff, poor information flow, weak communication channels, political interference, and conflicts within the system. Odukoya (2015) further stressed that frequent policy changes between 2000 and 2015 disrupted progress, as reforms and innovations shifted with each regime.

Aibieyi and Ogboator (2015) added that manpower shortages, lack of equipment, weak guidance and counseling services, and the absence of effective legislation hampered the 6-3-3-4 system. Collectively, these findings show that Nigeria’s education policies often struggle in practice, limiting their contribution to meaningful national development.

Breakdown of Nigerian Education Budgetary Allocation For A Decade

Years	Percentage	Naira
2015	10.75%	483.2bn
2016	7.92%	480.3bn
2017	6.03%	448.4bn
2018	7.14%	651.2bn
2019	7.12%	634.6bn
2020	5.78%	607bn
2021	5.90%	771.5bn
2022	5.39%	923.8bn

2023	5.21%	1.07tn
2024	5.52%	1.59tn

Source: Budget Office of the Federation

The table above shows Nigeria’s education budget over the last decade. All allocations fall far below UNESCO’s recommended 26% of the annual budget. This shortfall highlights chronic underfunding, which undermines the implementation of educational policies. Without sufficient resources, infrastructure, staffing, and quality improvements remain limited, and this directly slows national economic development.

Specific Challenges on Nigeria Educational Policy Implementation

Despite numerous reforms and policies, Nigeria’s education system still struggles with major obstacles that limit its impact on development. Some key challenges include:

- **Inadequate Funding:** Chronic underfunding leaves schools without essential resources for infrastructure, learning materials, and teacher support. Many institutions operate with overcrowded classrooms, poor facilities, and insufficient equipment.
- **Quality Assurance:** There are wide disparities in the quality of education across regions. Urban schools often have better facilities and staff than rural ones, deepening inequality and restricting equal opportunities for learners nationwide.
- **Curriculum Relevance:** The curriculum is frequently criticized as outdated and misaligned with modern workforce needs. Without regular updates to reflect global trends and technological advances, graduates remain ill-prepared for current labor market demands.

Together, these issues weaken the effectiveness of policies and prevent education from serving as a strong driver of Nigeria’s national development.

Executive Summary

Education is a critical driver of economic growth and social development in Nigeria, yet weak implementation of educational policies continues to hinder progress. This paper explores how poorly executed reforms—rooted in chronic underfunding, frequent policy changes, outdated curricula, and governance challenges—limit the sector’s role in national development. A historical review shows that although Nigeria has introduced several education policies since independence, inconsistent execution and corruption have created a persistent gap between intentions and outcomes. For education to effectively power economic transformation, Nigeria must ensure stable funding, align curricula with labor market needs, strengthen accountability, and sustain policy continuity. Without these measures, the

nation's educational system will remain unable to drive the productivity and innovation necessary for lasting growth.

Conclusion

Education remains one of the strongest pillars for driving Nigeria's economic growth and social development. While policies have been designed to transform the sector, frequent changes, inadequate funding, poor implementation, and systemic weaknesses have limited their full impact. As the history of Nigeria's educational reforms shows, progress has often been made, but setbacks continue to hold the system back from realizing its potential.

To move forward, Nigeria must prioritize consistent and sustained funding, ensure policy continuity across political regimes, update curricula to meet modern labor demands, and strengthen accountability in implementation. Education must be treated not as a political tool but as a national investment capable of unlocking creativity, innovation, and productivity.

Only when policies are faithfully implemented and supported with adequate resources will education fulfill its role as a catalyst for national development. A strong, relevant, and equitable education system is not only necessary for individual empowerment but also essential for building a prosperous and globally competitive Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian government should progressively raise education funding to meet the UNESCO benchmark of 15–20% of annual budgets. Consistent investment is vital for improving infrastructure, teacher welfare, and learning resources.
2. Establish independent monitoring and evaluation units within the education sector to ensure policies move beyond design into measurable outcomes. This will bridge the gap between intentions and results.
3. Successive governments should avoid abrupt changes in educational policies. A national education framework insulated from political cycles will provide consistency and long-term stability.
4. Curricula should be regularly reviewed to reflect labor market demands, technological innovation, and entrepreneurship, ensuring graduates possess relevant skills for Nigeria's economy.
5. Transparent procurement systems, digital record-keeping, and community involvement in education governance can minimize diversion of funds and misuse of resources.
6. Continuous training, professional development, and better remuneration should be prioritized to enhance teacher quality, motivation, and productivity.
7. Integrating ICT into classrooms and expanding digital learning platforms will help close gaps exposed during crises like COVID-19 and prepare

students for a digital economy.

8. Collaboration with private sector and international development partners can provide funding, technical expertise, and innovation to strengthen Nigeria's education sector.

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