

HUMAN CAPITAL: NIGERIA'S EDUCATION ACCESS CONUNDRUM

July 28, 2023
Policy Briefs Featured



With over 60% of her people below 35, Nigeria is a population with bustling youthful energy. This implies that there is a lot of human capital that can be captured for the country's socioeconomic development. The World Bank defines human capital as consisting of the knowledge, skills, and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society. However, the conversation on human capital transcends just the presence of humans to their level of productivity, which includes their skills and capacities to produce socioeconomic outputs. This is where the education sector comes in. Education stands as a crucial supplier of human capital. The education sector should equip people with the necessary skills and refine their intellectual capacity so that they can meaningfully contribute to their communities and nation. Well-educated people should be able to lead meaningful personal lives, solve problems in their communities, and help improve the quality of life in the nation with their skills and knowledge while being agents of social cohesion. It is no news that the education sector in Nigeria is marred with several challenges that have adversely impacted Nigeria's human capital. As of 2020, Nigeria has a Human Capital Index pegged at 0.36 by the World Bank, ranking it 168th of 173 countries

globally. This was up from 0.34 in 2018 which ranked the country as the 152nd of the 157 countries surveyed. The slow growth of Nigeria's human capital index can be assigned to the ever-increasing challenges in the realities of educating the Nigerian populace.

From unschooled children to unemployed graduates, there is an urgent need to address the challenges of education with a systemic approach. However, attempting to solve the problem requires a detailed understanding of the issues first. The education sector is a system with many moving parts and thus requires a systemic approach to its reformation. Reforming education in Nigeria necessitates that the challenges are understood more holistically.



The Tripartite Challenges

The multifaceted challenges of education in Nigeria can be mapped into 3 major categories:

- The Access Gap
- The Quality Gap
- The Outcome Gap

The access gap details the multilayered roadblocks that the Nigerian populace has in accessing the form of education that is required for proper skill-building at their level. The quality gap aggregates the many-sided problems of low quality of the current education system that is accessible. The outcome gaps detail

the realities of meagre skills and capacities of the graduates of the educational system and the human capital implications of this reality.

This policy paper looks into the access gap to provide deeper insights into its current realities, and how it is being addressed now while providing some recommendations on new strategies to bridge the gap.

Understanding the Access Gap

Low access to education is a challenge that looms over all the tiers of education and affects all demographic classes. The access gap can be grouped into 3 major issues:

- **Out-Of-School Children**

Out of the 244 million out-of-school children (OOSC) worldwide in 2021, UNESCO estimated OOSC aged 6-18 in Nigeria at 20 million. This is up the 13.7 million mark reported by World Bank in 2013. This makes 1 of every 12 out-of-school children in the world to be a Nigerian. As of 2019, the gross enrollment rate in primary school is 68% of children at the required age, while it stood at 54.4% for secondary school. However, this does not fully reflect the differences in the geopolitical realities as the net primary school attendance rate plummets to 53% in Northern Nigeria, according to UNICEF. From a gender stance, the situation worsens as more than half of the girls in North East and North West Nigeria are not in school, with some states in the region recording as low as 47.3% female primary net attendance.

The causes of the OOSC challenge are both general and specific to geopolitical regions. Generally, children's access to education is obstructed by poverty and an inadequate amount of schools and learning facilities. Viewed from the geopolitical angle, the roadblocks become more diverse and unequally intensified. The Northern regions are plagued with several socio-cultural challenges, with insurgency being a leading factor. For example, reports show that in 2021 alone, there were at least 25 terrorist attacks on schools in the North leading to the abduction of 1,440 children, while at least 16 children were killed. In March 2021, about 618 schools were shut down in Kano, Niger, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Yobe states, over the fear of attack and abduction of students and staff. Other issues included the perception of schooling as inherently Western and thus a poor reflection of immediate culture; poor perceptions of the female gender and religious sentiments.



The sociocultural challenges in the Southern Region include the lack of foster care as seen, for example, in the growing number of street children. Other causes are the poor perception of the need for formal education in light of the rising rate of youth unemployment; and child labour issues where the child is expected to be an economic contributor to the family.

Efforts to address the OOSC conundrum are ongoing at various tiers of government in partnership with local and international organizations. Examples include the Federal Government-sponsored Almajiri Education Program (AEP) aimed for deployment in 19 northern states. The goal of AEP is to improve access for vulnerable groups in the delivery of Universal Basic Education (UBE), especially the Almajiri, and learners in the Qur'anic schools, through remodeling the Qur'anic education to provide access and equity to Basic Education. Another initiative is the Better Education Service Delivery for all (BESDA), a World Bank-supported program that is jointly implemented by the Federal and State Governments in Nigeria. BESDA aims at bringing out-of-school children into the classroom, improve literacy, and strengthen accountability for results in basic education. In 2017, the World Bank provided \$611 million in credit for BESDA.

The rising number of out-of-school children indicates that despite the efforts, there remains the need to ramp up new and more innovative ways to address access to education, particularly for out-of-school children.

- **Low Completion Rate**

The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) in its 2018 Education Profile Indicators reported that only 86.81% of entrants complete primary school. This represents the best case situation as early education completion stands at 35.47%; while secondary education completion rate stands at 42.27%. Just like the out-of-school situation, the national average figures do not fully reflect the situation across all geopolitical zones as primary school completion in North Central, for example, stands at 63.84%.

However, in the same 2018, UNESCO reported the primary school completion rate at 70.80% while pegging the junior and senior secondary completion rates at 62.46% and 49.30% respectively. This was below the earlier reported 73.36% primary school completion rate in 2010. The more recent UNESCO data in 2021 shows an upward trajectory at a 73.14% completion rate in primary school, 67.77% in junior secondary, and 53.71% in senior secondary. The significant gain recorded towards the 2020 school year in primary completion rate that increased the primary completion rate from 72.94% to 79.70% was lost, possibly due to the adverse post-COVID effect, tanking the figures back to 73.1% in 2021. Similar trends can be observed in secondary school too.

The gender parity narrative of the UNESCO data shows an increasing trend of the gender divide in completion rate as the students move from lower levels of education to higher levels. At the primary level, there is a growing equality of chances of completion particularly in the last 5 years of data collection (2017-2021) with completion percentage differences between both genders usually lesser than 2 percentage points. However, at junior secondary school level and senior secondary, the gap becomes progressively pronounced – close to 10 and 15 percentage points respectively.

- **Leaky Education Pipeline**

A prominent way that the access gap manifests is the leaky education pipeline, a phenomenon that describes the progressive reduction in access to education as one moves higher in the tiers of education. In Nigeria, access to education becomes progressively difficult as children and youth move across education tiers. This is seen in the marked decrease in attendance rate from 68% in primary school to 54% in secondary school to about 12% in tertiary education.

Tertiary education is the least accessed form of education in Nigeria. Several factors are responsible for this; prominent among them is the higher cost of tertiary education. The annual tuition cost in a Nigerian university ranges between \$200-\$5000, which remarkably differs from the socioeconomic realities of the nation with over 33% of her population living below \$2 daily.

The inadequate number of tertiary institutions also exacerbates this challenge with less than 300 tertiary institutions saddled with the responsibility of catering to the education needs of an annual average of 1.8 million prospective students writing the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) and whose results expire every year.

One major way in which the leak is being addressed, particularly between secondary and tertiary education, is through the provision of alternative education routes in the form of vocational and other forms of specialized institutes. The Revised National Policy on Education (2013) regards vocational institutes as a valid form of tertiary education and assigns the Federal Government the responsibilities of accrediting, certifying, and regulating these institutions in light of the human capital goals of Nigeria.

The gap on the pathway to higher education is also being bridged by the Open and Distance Learning System. The National Open University Nigeria (NOUN), which is the only single-mode open and distance learning University in Nigeria was first launched in 1983 and then relaunched in 2001 by President Olusegun Obasanjo. NOUN which had a pioneer student enrollment of 32,400 in 2001 has now grown to have about 580,000 enrolled students spread across 78 study centers across Nigeria.

A more recent solution aimed at bridging access to higher education is the student loan bill which was introduced in 2016 and signed into law in 2023 by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The Student Loan Fund is to provide interest-free tuition loans to students from indigent families.

However, the challenges remain as there are yet roadblocks associated with some of the solutions being provided. For example, one of the conditions for accessing the student loan fund is a family's annual income that is not less than 500,000NGN. This automatically locks out a student with a family monthly income of 50,000NGN, which is still not enough for catering to the education needs relative to the rising cost.

Data Inconsistencies

Other issues that feed into the access gap include inconsistencies of available data, which has made it more difficult to deeply understand the challenge. Different stakeholders of education use various methods of understanding the challenges that result in various data.

This inconsistency makes understanding the problem difficult and thus hinders the capacity to provide solutions. It is important that collaboration is deepened between stakeholders at diverse levels.

Recommendations

To address the complex OOSC challenge, there is the need for new approaches:

- ***Accelerated Learning*** System: This is a promising approach particularly for older out-of-school children between ages 10-18 who might have more sociological challenges adjusting to a conventional school because of their age as compared to their colleagues. These challenges make it difficult for them to finish schooling even when they eventually access basic education, thereby spilling over into the low completion challenge. The accelerated learning approach can create an alternative education model for older out-of-school children to learn at a pace that can be faster than the usual 6 years of primary education by leveraging the knowledge they must have acquired informally by being active participants in their community. The accelerated learning approach is already being piloted on smaller scales by local NGOs such as The Destiny Trust which hosts the Bridge Learning Centre (BLC). BLC provides a 3-year accelerated education programme that enables over-aged out-of-school children (usually ages 10-18) to acquire basic education, reintegrate into conventional schools at age-appropriate levels, and acquire vocational skills. Alternative models like BLC can be extended more nationally to address the rising OOSC challenge.
- ***Vocational Education***: Vocational institutes can be strengthened and modernized in a way that makes them rival the established formal education tertiary systems and deliver similar intellectual development even if within the

context of a specialized vocational skill. There is a growing person-to-person vocational education system in Nigeria, where individuals are trained by more skilled individuals or small business organizations. This existing framework can be tapped into and better structured through public-private partnership models to be able to take in even more people and produce better-skilled human capital.

- **Virtual Learning:** More investment should be made into the new models of virtual skill-specific education, where people are skilled for a specific role, usually in technology-related fields, and connected with industries where their skills are needed. This self-directed open model of learning can be accessible to anyone with basic education skills and required facilities.
- **Poverty Alleviation Incentive Approach:** The OOSC and Low Completion Rate challenges to access to education can be addressed by making school enrolment of children a condition for participation in cash transfer programs aimed at fighting poverty.

Conclusion

The youth population of Nigeria can be of major benefit for the socioeconomic development of the nation (demographic dividend) if the human capital is well harnessed. A commitment to maximize human capital must be premised on the foundational commitment to invest more in strengthening the Nigerian education system, starting from increasing and bridging the access gap. The more Nigerians can access education, the higher the chances they can contribute to nationhood and development.