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THE IMPLEMENTATION VOID: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF POLICY INSTRUMENTS, STRUCTURAL DISPARITIES, AND STUDENT ENROLMENT PATHWAYS IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION

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Introduction

Educational policies are the primary structural determinants of student enrolment, yet Nigeria continues to face a profound paradox: despite decades of ambitious reforms, including the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, admission regulatory frameworks, and various financing initiatives, enrolment rates remain persistently uneven across regions and socio-economic strata. Millions of school-age children remain out of the formal education system, and those who are enrolled often experience conditions that undermine sustained attendance and completion. While existing scholarship has examined isolated policy domains, the evidence base remains fragmented, lacking a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates how funding, admission, and governance instruments interact to shape enrolment outcomes. Furthermore, the phenomenon of "policy somersault", frequent, inconsistent shifts in educational policy, has been repeatedly identified as a barrier, yet its cumulative structural impact on enrolment trajectories remains insufficiently quantified (Gift & Olalekan, 2020; Gift *et al.,* 2020; Morufu *et al.,* 2021; Ibimilua & Raimi, 2026; Ibimilua *et al.,* 2026). This systematic review addresses this critical gap by synthesizing fragmented evidence to clarify the relationship between educational policies and enrolment, identifying the structural barriers that limit policy effectiveness, and providing an evidence-based pathway for improving equitable access in Nigeria. By examining the intersection of policy design, governance quality, and socio-economic inequality, this review offers novel insights into why well-intentioned educational reforms frequently fail to translate into measurable enrolment gains, thereby informing more resilient and equitable policy architecture for national and international audiences. The primary objective of this systematic review was to synthesize empirical evidence on how educational policies influence student enrolment in Nigeria, with a specific focus on identifying the major policy

domains, quantifying their statistical effects, mapping structural disparities, and synthesizing implementation challenges. Secondary objectives were to: (1) evaluate the direction and strength of effects of admission, funding, and governance policies on enrolment trends; (2) analyse the socio-economic, regional, and institutional disparities that shape enrolment patterns; and (3) identify actionable policy directions to improve equitable and sustained enrolment outcomes across basic, secondary, and tertiary education levels.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic review design, adhering to PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A comprehensive search strategy was executed across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL), supplemented by institutional repositories and government policy documents from the Federal Ministry of Education. The search covered publications from 2000 to June 2026 to capture major reforms, including the UBE expansion period. Studies were included if they examined educational policies implemented in Nigeria and assessed their effects on student enrolment, access, or participation using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs. Data extraction focused on policy type, study design, sample characteristics, and enrolment outcomes, alongside implementation challenges and regional disparities. Methodological quality was assessed using adapted Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) checklists, with independent dual-reviewer appraisal. Due to heterogeneity in study designs and enrolment indicators, a meta-analysis was not feasible; instead, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted in line with SWiM (Synthesis Without Meta-analysis) guidelines. Evidence certainty was assessed narratively based on methodological quality, consistency, and strength of association, with effect-direction coding (+/-) and strength grading (high/moderate/low) applied across the evidence base. The review included 15 studies for Objective 1, 15 for Objective 2, 12 for Objective 3, and 12 for Objective 4.

Results

The synthesis revealed a tri-polar effect structure governing enrolment outcomes in Nigeria. Funding policies emerged as the most consistently positive and statistically robust driver of enrolment expansion, with multiple quantitative studies demonstrating strong associations between increased education financing and improved institutional capacity, infrastructure development, and student intake (predominantly positive effects, high-strength evidence). Admission policies exhibited a bidirectional statistical effect: while predictive admission models and structured entry systems improved access and transparency, restrictive mechanisms such as UTME benchmark increases and carrying capacity limits exerted significant downward pressure on enrolment inflows, particularly in higher education (mixed effects, high-strength evidence). Governance policies were the most system-sensitive, functioning as both stabilising and destabilising mechanisms depending on implementation quality; evidence consistently showed that weak governance, policy inconsistency, and "policy somersaults" negatively affected enrolment stability (67% of studies reporting negative effects, high-strength evidence). Across the broader evidence base, socio-economic inequality emerged as the strongest determinant of enrolment disparities (83% negative effect dominance, high-strength evidence), followed by regional disparities (persistent urban-rural and north-south divides) and institutional weaknesses (infrastructure deficits, staffing shortages). Implementation failures accounted for the largest barrier cluster, with 67% of studies reporting negative enrolment system effects. Critically, the evidence base is robust but skewed: 62.5% of studies were graded as high quality, with particularly strong recent contributions (2023-2025) supporting the link between educational policies and enrolment, yet the persistent negative dominance of structural disparities (84.6% of disparity effects were negative) underscores that policy design alone is insufficient without equity-focused implementation.

Conclusion

This systematic review demonstrates that educational policies in Nigeria significantly influence student enrolment, but their effectiveness is fundamentally constrained by a complex interaction between policy design, governance stability, and structural inequality. The evidence reveals a clear

hierarchy of policy effectiveness: funding acts as the primary expansionary driver, admission policy functions as a dual-direction regulatory mechanism, and governance quality serves as the critical stabilising moderator of enrolment outcomes. However, the review also exposes a critical implementation void: well-formulated policies consistently fail to achieve intended enrolment outcomes due to weak institutional capacity, inadequate coordination, policy instability, and entrenched socio-economic and regional disparities. The findings underscore that improving enrolment in Nigeria depends less on the availability of policies and more on implementation fidelity, governance continuity, and the capacity to translate policy intent into measurable educational access. The persistence of socio-economic inequality as the strongest determinant of enrolment disparities highlights the need for targeted, equity-focused interventions that address the structural barriers preventing marginalised populations from accessing and remaining in school.

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