



PLANNING INCLUSIVE TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALS

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Abstract

Tertiary Education is a veritable means for ensuring individual and national development. It fosters the restoration and transformation of societies, and produces high level manpower for all facets of the economy. It is more useful when every qualified individual is given the chance and privilege to receive quality education in a conducive and promising environment, even at the tertiary education level. The wide spectrum of education given to all, irrespective of physical, mental or emotional disadvantages or disabilities is referred to as inclusive education. The paper examined the planning requirements for inclusive tertiary education in Nigeria. It discusses the concepts of inclusive tertiary education, planning requirements for inclusive education, potentials, challenges and implementation strategies for inclusive education. It was suggested that governments at all levels of governance should encourage inclusive tertiary education, by not only providing the funds needed for infrastructure, but also increase awareness campaigns in collaboration with non-governmental organisations and educational agencies to eliminate the stigma associated with disabilities in order to encourage social demand for tertiary education by people with disabilities as well as to promote social support for inclusive education.

Key words: Challenges, Inclusive Education, Planning Requirements, Potentials, Tertiary Education.

Introduction

Planning for inclusive tertiary education in Nigeria is essential to achieving equitable access to quality education for all learners, including those who are physically challenged or have special educational needs. As Nigeria seeks to fulfill its obligations under international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), inclusive education has become a pivotal component of the nation's educational development strategy. Inclusive education refers to a system of education that accommodates and responds to the diverse needs of all learners by removing barriers to learning and participation. It goes beyond mere physical integration by promoting a culture of respect for diversity, equity, and social justice within the school environment (UNESCO, 2020). Every learner, regardless of physical, sensory, intellectual, or emotional challenges deserves access to an education that is tailored to their individual abilities and circumstances.

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act affirm the rights of all children to receive education without discrimination. These policy documents mandate the inclusion of learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms and emphasize the creation of enabling environments that support their academic and social development. In a study by Nwadiani (2010), he



emphasized that effective educational planning must address issues of access, equity, and quality to ensure that no learner is left behind. Despite these policy provisions, planning for inclusive secondary education in Nigeria is fraught with challenges. These include negative societal attitudes towards persons with disabilities, insufficient funding, lack of appropriate infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and poor policy implementation. Without comprehensive and strategic planning, the vision of inclusive education risks remaining unfulfilled.

However, there are growing prospects. With sustained efforts by policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, inclusive education in Nigeria can become a vehicle for national integration and human capital development. Embracing inclusive practices will not only improve learning outcomes for students with special needs but also enrich the learning experience for all students through exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences. This paper is hinged on the Systems Theory, originally developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968). The theory views an organization as a set of interrelated part working together to achieve a common goal. In the context of educational planning, this theory implies that the school system functions as an interdependent structure involving inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops.

Concept of Inclusive Tertiary Education

Tertiary education occupies a pivotal position within the Nigerian educational system, serving as the highest stage of formal education in Nigeria. According to the National policy on Education (FRN 2012), tertiary education is structured into four categories; Junior doctorate degrees in different fields; Polytechnics offering National Diploma and Higher Polytechnics Diploma; College of Education awarding National Certificate in Education (NCE); Monotechnics and specialized institutions, specializing in single disciplines like agricultures, health and technology. The objectives of tertiary education in Nigeria include the following; develop high level manpower; contribute to national development; promote research and innovation. Preserve and transmit knowledge and culture; and foster unity and natural integration, (FRN 2014). Inclusive secondary education refers to a system of education that is structured to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners, including those who are physically challenged, have learning difficulties, or come from disadvantaged backgrounds, by ensuring their full participation and equal opportunities within mainstream schools. It is rooted in the principle that every learner has a right to quality education, regardless of individual differences (UNESCO, 2023).

This concept extends beyond physical access to classrooms. It encompasses curriculum adaptation, teacher preparedness, flexible teaching methods, peer support, and collaborative engagement with families and communities. Inclusive education does not only benefit learners with special needs; it improves the overall quality of education by promoting respect, empathy, and diversity in learning environments (UNICEF, 2022). According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2023), inclusive education at the secondary level is vital because it contributes significantly to equity in educational outcomes and is instrumental in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

In Nigeria, inclusive tertiary education has gained attention due to the need to address historical inequalities in access and learning outcomes. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) and other policy instruments advocate for the integration of students with special needs into regular schools through appropriate support systems. However, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited infrastructure, negative societal attitudes, and weak policy implementation continue to hinder full inclusion (Adebayo & Oyesola, 2021).

Omede and Bakare (2022) emphasize that inclusive tertiary education must be anchored on the philosophy of equal access and learner-centered pedagogy. It requires a paradigm shift from viewing learners with special needs as objects of charity to seeing them as rights-holders whose full participation enriches the learning environment for all. Effective inclusive education must therefore ensure that all learners regardless



of their abilities are present (access), participating (engagement), and achieving (learning outcomes). This aligns with UNICEF's (2022) framework which defines inclusion as a process of identifying and removing barriers to learning for every child.

Planning Needs for Inclusive tertiary Education in Nigeria

Effective planning is the foundation of any sustainable educational reform, especially when it comes to inclusive education. In Nigeria, where learners with physical, sensory, intellectual, or emotional challenges often face marginalization in mainstream schooling, a deliberate, data-driven, and equity-focused planning process is required to ensure that secondary education systems are inclusive, accessible, and functional for all. Educational planning, as defined by Nwadiani (2010), is a systematic process of preparing a set of decisions for future action aimed at achieving educational goals through the optimal use of scarce resources. When applied to inclusive secondary education, planning must prioritize the removal of barriers and the provision of support mechanisms to ensure participation, achievement, and well-being of learners with special needs.

i. Policy and Legislative Frameworks

Planning for inclusive tertiary education must begin with clear and enforceable policies that align with national and international frameworks. Nigeria has ratified instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and is a signatory to the Salamanca Statement (1994). However, translating these into actionable policies at the state and school levels requires coordinated planning. According to UNESCO (2023), policies must define inclusion clearly, assign responsibilities, and ensure compliance through monitoring and evaluation systems. At the national level, the National Policy on Education (2013) and the National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015) outline the commitment to inclusive education, but planners must ensure these policies are reflected in school development plans, budget allocations, and classroom practices.

ii. Infrastructure and Accessibility

Inclusive education requires that school infrastructure be physically accessible to all learners. This includes: Ramps, accessible toilets, and elevators, visual and auditory signage, modified classrooms and science labs, and safe transport systems. As Ogunbayo and Aladejana (2022) stated, only a small fraction of secondary schools in Nigeria meet the minimum physical accessibility standards for learners with disabilities. Planning must therefore include accessibility audits, infrastructure upgrades, and adherence to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.

iii. Teacher Preparation and Continuous Professional Development

Teachers are the primary implementers of inclusive practices. As such, planning must provide for: Recruitment of special education professionals, training in differentiated instruction and inclusive pedagogy, ongoing professional development on assistive technologies and inclusive assessment. Adebayo and Oyesola (2021) emphasize that many Nigerian secondary school teachers lack the skills and confidence to teach learners with special needs. Nwadiani (2010) argues that no educational plan is complete without adequate consideration of teacher quality and deployment.

iv. Curriculum Flexibility and Learning Materials

An inclusive tertiary education system must be supported by a flexible and adaptive curriculum that accommodates varying learning styles, paces, and capacities. This includes: Use of Individualized Education Plans (EPs), availability of braille, large print, audio materials, integration of life skills and functional academics. Furthermore, it was stated in UNICEF (2022), that inclusive planning must ensure that curriculum content and delivery methods support engagement and achievement for learners with disabilities, without compromising educational standards.



V. Funding and Resource Allocation

Inclusion cannot be realized without financial commitment. Inclusive education requires: Budgetary provisions for specialized learning aids, grants or subsidies to schools implementing inclusive programs, funding for inclusive teacher training and recruitment. Planning must include mechanisms to ensure equity in resource distribution, especially between urban and rural schools. As noted by Okorie and Olatunji (2023), without targeted funding, inclusive education efforts will remain superficial and unsustainable.

vi. Stakeholder Collaboration and Community Engagement

Effective planning must involve all relevant stakeholders, like Ministries of Education and Finance, school heads and teachers, parents of children with special needs, civil society organizations and disability rights groups. According to UNESCO (2023), inclusive planning is most successful when it is participatory, transparent, and informed by local realities. In Nigeria, fostering community ownership and advocacy is essential for changing negative attitudes and sustaining inclusion.

vii. Data Collection and Monitoring

Planning for inclusion must be evidence-based, relying on accurate data about the number of learners with special needs, their distribution, learning outcomes, and challenges. This involves: Developing inclusive education indicators, disaggregating data by disability, gender, and location, Implementing tracking and reporting systems at the school level. Adekunle and Balogun (2022) highlighted that lack of data on learners with disabilities undermines policy formulation and budgeting. Therefore, planning must incorporate robust data systems integrated with national education management information systems (EMIS).

Implementation Strategies for Inclusive Tertiary Education in Nigeria

While inclusive tertiary education in Nigeria has been widely recognized as a policy priority, the gap between policy and practice remain significant. To bridge this gap, effective implementation strategies are necessary hence it involves the strategies that are inclusive, sustainable, and contextually relevant. Implementation, in this regard, involves translating policy plans and planning frameworks into actionable programs, resource allocation, institutional practices, and community engagement mechanisms. As Nwadiani (2010) asserts, educational plans are only as useful as the strategies devised to bring them to fruition, particularly in resource-limited contexts like Nigeria.

i Strengthening Policy Enforcement Mechanisms

Many Nigerian policies promote inclusion, but enforcement is often weak. The strategy is to establish inclusive education units at the federal, state, and local levels to: Monitor school compliance with inclusion policies, support schools with implementation guides, conduct regular audits and reviews. UNESCO (2023) recommends embedding inclusion indicators into national performance frameworks to improve accountability and consistency in policy implementation.

ii. Establishing Inclusive School-Based Leadership

School leaders are central to creating inclusive learning environments. Administrators must be trained and empowered to promote inclusive values and school cultures, facilitate peer support among teachers, manage inclusive classrooms with equity and flexibility. UNICEF (2022) highlighted that, inclusive school leadership transforms vision into practice by fostering collaboration, innovation, and responsiveness to diverse learner needs.



iii. Inclusive Teacher Development Programs

One of the most direct ways to implement inclusive education is by investing in teacher training. Key strategies include: Pre-service and in-service training focused on inclusive pedagogy, exposure to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, mentorship and collaborative learning among teachers. Adekunle and Balogun (2022) stress that professional learning communities should be established to support peer-to-peer training and the sharing of inclusive strategies within and across schools.

iv. Provision and Utilization of Assistive Technologies

Assistive technologies and inclusive learning resources are essential in meeting the needs of learners with visual, auditory, mobility, and cognitive impairments. Implementation strategies must include: Procurement and distribution of devices (for example, braille machines, hearing aids, screen readers), teacher training on how to integrate these technologies, partnerships with ICT companies and NGOs to scale access. Ogunbayo and Aladejana (2022) advocate for public-private collaboration to reduce costs and increase availability of such tools, especially in underserved regions.

V. Community and Parent Engagement

Inclusion must be understood and supported beyond the school walls. Parents and communities must be sensitized and engaged to: Advocate for inclusive practices, monitor learner progress, dismantle harmful stereotypes and beliefs. Obanya (2021) notes that successful implementation depends heavily on how well families and communities are involved in the educational journeys of children with special needs.

vi. Inclusive Budgeting and Resource Mobilization

An implementation plan is ineffective without adequate funding. Strategies must include: Creating dedicated budget lines for inclusive education, securing grants from development partners, mobilizing community-based support and philanthropic investments. As Okorie and Olatunji (2023) suggest, inclusive budgeting should prioritize high-need areas and ensure transparency in resource use.

vi. Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

To ensure that strategies are working, there must be continuous tracking of: Enrollment and retention rates of students with special needs, teacher effectiveness in inclusive classrooms, learning outcomes and well-being of all learners. This can be achieved through tools like the Education Management Information System (EMIS), adapted to include disability-specific indicators (UNESCO, 2023).

Benefits of Planning Inclusive Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Planning for inclusive tertiary education yields multiple benefits that positively impact individual learners, educational institutions, and society at large. These benefits reflect current educational trends and inclusive development goals both nationally and globally.

i. Improved Educational Access and Equity

Inclusive planning ensures that learners with physical, intellectual, sensory, or psychosocial challenges have equal opportunities to enroll in and benefit from tertiary education. When schools are planned with accessibility, teaching aids, and trained personnel in mind, it leads to increased enrollment and retention of students with special needs (UNESCO, 2023).

ii. Enhanced Learning Outcomes for All Learners



Inclusive education benefits all students, not just those with special needs. A classroom that uses differentiated instruction, peer collaboration, and individualized learning support boosts cognitive and social outcomes across the board. UNICEF (2022) affirms that inclusive settings help all learners develop empathy, adaptability, and cooperation.

ii. Promotion of Social Inclusion and Cohesion

When students from diverse backgrounds and abilities learn together, schools become a reflection of a just society. Inclusion fosters mutual respect, reduces stigma and discrimination, and builds strong interpersonal skills that extend beyond the classroom (Adebayo & Oyesola, 2021).

iv. Effective Use of Resources

Strategic planning for inclusion encourages optimal use of available resources by reducing duplication (for example, separate schools for special needs), and instead creating one system that meets diverse needs. According to Okorie and Olatunji (2023), integrated systems are more sustainable in the long term.

v. Professional Growth for Educators

Implementing inclusive practices expands teachers' professional competencies in pedagogy, technology, assessment, and emotional intelligence. Teachers in inclusive classrooms gain a broader toolkit that enhances their ability to manage complex learning environments effectively (Adekunle & Balogun, 2022).

vi. Fulfillment of National and International Education Mandates

Inclusive education aligns with Nigeria's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 4), the UNCRPD, and the National Policy on Education. Effective planning helps the country fulfill its obligations and avoid international sanctions or reputational damage.

Prospects of Planning Inclusive Secondary Education in Nigeria

The prospects of inclusive secondary education in Nigeria refer to the potential future opportunities, growth pathways, and transformative outcomes that can be achieved through deliberate and sustained planning efforts. These prospects are grounded in emerging trends, policy advancements, technological innovations, and evolving societal attitudes.

i. Structuring of Policy Framework and Legal Backing

There is an increasing national and global commitment to inclusive education. The growing momentum behind Nigeria's National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015), alongside the Child Rights Act and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018, sets the stage for more enforceable and structured inclusion in secondary schools. UNESCO (2023) notes that aligning national education policies with human rights instruments will continue to shape inclusive education prospects.

ii. Expansion of Digital and Assistive Technologies

With advancements in digital learning and assistive tools (e.g., screen readers, text-to-speech software, AI tutors), Nigeria has the prospect of closing accessibility gaps. Planning that integrates inclusive technology will enable learners with special needs to participate more fully in mainstream classrooms, especially in resource-constrained environments (UNICEF, 2022).



iii. Development of Inclusive Teacher Education Curricula

There is a rising trend in Nigerian teacher education institutions to revise their curricula to include modules on inclusive pedagogy, adaptive assessments, and disability awareness. If this momentum continues, the future teaching workforce will be better equipped to implement inclusive practices at scale (Adekunle & Balogun, 2022).

iv. Increased Multisectoral and International Collaboration

The prospects for inclusive education in Nigeria are also enhanced by partnerships with development agencies, NGOs, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and international donor programs focused on inclusion. Such collaborations bring in funding, technical expertise, and scalable models of inclusive schooling (Okorie & Olatunji, 2023).

V. Data-Driven Education Planning

With the modernization of Nigeria's Education Management Information System (EMIS) and other digital databases, education planners can now capture disaggregated data on learners with special needs. This enhances evidence-based planning and allows for better targeting of interventions, thereby improving the scalability of inclusion (Ogunbayo & Aladejana, 2022).

vi. Positive Shifts in Societal Attitudes

Public awareness campaigns, inclusive advocacy, and representation in media are gradually reducing stigma and discrimination. Over time, this can foster a more inclusive culture, especially among school communities, which in turn supports smoother implementation of inclusive policies.

Challenges of Planning Inclusive Tertiary Education in Nigeria

Despite progressive policies and growing global attention, the effective planning and implementation of inclusive tertiary education in Nigeria faces numerous systemic, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges. These barriers hinder the actualization of equitable learning environments where all students, including the physically challenged and those with special learning needs can thrive.

i. Inadequate Policy Implementation and Political Will

Although Nigeria has developed several inclusive education policies (e.g., the National Policy on Special Needs Education, 2015), there is often a disconnect between policy formulation and actual practice. Weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of clarity in operational guidelines, and poor accountability structures limit their effectiveness (UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, policy implementation is often inconsistent across states due to decentralized education governance and limited political commitment at subnational levels.

ii. Insufficient Funding and Poor Resource Allocation

Inclusive education requires significant financial investment in infrastructure, assistive technologies, teacher training, and curriculum adaptation. However, budgetary allocations for inclusive programs remain low or non-existent in many states. According to Okorie and Olatunji (2023), inadequate and inequitable distribution of resources continues to widen the gap between policy ambition and classroom reality, especially in rural areas.

iii. Limited Data for Evidence-Based Planning



A major challenge is the lack of reliable, disaggregated data on the number and types of disabilities among tertiary school learners. Without accurate data, planners struggle to identify needs, allocate resources, and monitor progress. Ogunbayo and Aladejana (2022) noted that Nigeria's Education Management Information System (EMIS) is yet to be fully optimized for capturing disability-specific indicators

iv. Shortage of Trained Inclusive Education Personnel

There is a critical shortage of special education Lecturers and inclusive education specialists in Nigeria's secondary schools. Mainstream teachers often lack the training to manage diverse learning needs or to use assistive technologies. Adekunle and Balogun (2022) report that teacher training institutions do not adequately prepare future educators to work in inclusive classrooms, resulting in professional anxiety and resistance.

v. Inaccessible School Infrastructure

Many secondary schools are physically inaccessible to learners with mobility impairments. Facilities like ramps, elevators, accessible toilets, and adaptive furniture are largely absent. Poorly planned school infrastructure poses significant barriers to access and full participation for physically challenged students (UNICEF, 2022).

vi. Cultural Beliefs and Societal Attitudes

In several Nigerian communities, cultural misconceptions and stigma associated with disabilities persist. Some parents hide or isolate their children due to shame or fear of discrimination. These deep-rooted negative societal attitudes contribute to school dropouts, low enrolment, and reduced government accountability (Adebayo & Oyesola, 2021).

vii. Curriculum Rigidity and Assessment Challenges

Nigeria's tertiary institutions curriculum is often standardized and exam-driven, leaving little room for individualized learning paths or adaptive instruction. Inclusive learners struggle in environments that do not recognize varying cognitive paces or offer flexible assessment models (UNESCO, 2023). Without curriculum reforms, inclusion becomes difficult to actualize meaningfully.

vii. Fragmentation across Ministries and Agencies

The lack of inter-ministerial collaboration, particularly between the Ministries of Education, Health, and Social Development leads to fragmented services and duplication of efforts. This weak coordination undermines comprehensive planning for inclusive secondary education (Okorie & Olatunji, 2023).

Conclusion

Inclusive tertiary education in Nigeria is vital for achieving equity and national development. Effective planning is way to ensuring that all learners, including those with special needs, have equal access to quality education. While policies exist, challenges such as poor implementation, limited resources, and societal attitudes continue to hinder progress. However, with stronger political commitment, better funding, trained educators, and inclusive infrastructure, the prospects are promising. As Nwadiani (2010) emphasized, planning must be proactive, evidence-based, and inclusive. Moving forward, stakeholders must collaborate to make inclusion a central pillar of educational reform and not as a secondary goal.

Suggestions

Based on the issues, benefits, and prospects discussed, the following suggestions are offered to improve the planning and implementation of inclusive tertiary education in Nigeria:



1. The Federal and State Ministries of Education should develop clear implementation guidelines for inclusive education policies, with monitoring tools and accountability measures to ensure compliance at the school level.
2. Governments should allocate dedicated funding for inclusive education in national and state budgets. This funding should cover infrastructure upgrades, assistive technologies, teacher training, and learning materials for students with special needs.
3. Teacher education programs should be revised to include inclusive pedagogy, classroom management for diverse learners, and the use of assistive technology. In-service training should also be prioritized to update existing teachers on inclusive practices.
4. Schools must be renovated or built to meet universal design standards, including ramps, accessible toilets, appropriate signage, and classroom layouts that accommodate physically challenged students.

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