



Article

Integrating Technological Innovation for Students' Admission in Public Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria: A Call for Decentralized Unified Examination System

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Abstract: This study is a position paper that examines integrating technological innovation for students' admission in public tertiary institutions in Nigeria: The is wake up call for decentralized unified examination system. The study advocates for a decentralized unified examination system that matches students' placements with their interests and career aspirations. Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) introduced Centralized Unified Admission System in Nigeria to bring into conformity with a standard and streamline the admission process into tertiary institutions. Additionally, technology-driven admission would facilitate processing seamless application and matching student-institution. The study draws attention to improved education quality, increased student motivation, enhanced workforce productivity, and greater institutional autonomy which are the expected benefits of the proposed reform. Policy reforms, stakeholder engagement, and technological adaptation are the clear roadmap for the implementation of this system. The study concludes that changing to a decentralized unified admission system is very important to make effective Nigeria's tertiary education sector, matching student interests with national human capital development needs, and making sure a more efficient and equitable admission process.

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1. Introduction

The introduction of Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in Nigeria is to centralize and standardize the admission process into tertiary institutions: universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS) is one of the JAMB's notable innovations planned to automate and streamline admissions to allow public scrutiny and efficiency. CAPS has the intention to bring back institutional autonomy, provide candidates with information on available choices, and eliminate multiple admissions (Joint Admission and Matriculation Board). The rationale behind implementing a unified admission system is efficiency, transparency and fairness. Simplifying the admission process by cutting duplicity and accelerating applicant placement would help to increase efficiency. Transparency: Making sure every interested party may clearly, merit-based choose from here on. Fairness: Giving every candidate, from background, equal chances to get admitted depending on merit[1]. Notwithstanding these goals, the centralized system has had unanticipated effects especially for

polytechnics and colleges of education. For candidates unable to get university entrance, these institutions may provide substitutes, which leads to the enrolment of students who might not be really interested in technical or teaching domains. This situation compromises the quality of technical training and education as students enrolled in these colleges could not be dedicated to their intended disciplines [2]. Based on their preferences, this position paper supports a decentralized unified examination system wherein prospective students may apply directly to their preferred institutions, be it universities, polytechnics, or colleges of education. Such a system would allow immediate reallocation to second or third-choice schools should candidates fall short of the cut-off criteria for their chosen selections. This strategy tries to improve the admission process by including technological advancements so that students are put in colleges in line with their career goals, therefore increasing the quality of education and professional satisfaction[3].

Entrance examinations and admission processes into tertiary institution in Nigeria before 1970s was conducted independently by each university, polytechnics and colleges of education. This fragmented system led to inefficiencies and inequalities. As a result of the challenges the Federal Government of Nigeria commissioned a study in 1976 to investigate the admission challenges and recommend a unified solution to bring a standardized and equitable admission process. The committee recommended that led to the introduction of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 1978 through a Decree No. 2 [4]. The primary mandate of JAMB was to organize entrance examinations and supervise the centralized admission process into universities in Nigeria. The first University Matriculation Examination (UME) was conducted in 1978, the same year. That marked the beginning of a unified approach to higher education admissions. JAMB's mandate was amended to include admissions into polytechnics, monotechnic, and colleges of education by Decree No. 33 of 1989. Admission became centralized[5]. Complaints increased about examination malpractice and inefficiencies throughout the 1990s and early 2000s JAMB organized their Paper-Based Tests (PBT). In 2013, JAMB introduced Computer-Based Testing (CBT) alongside paper-based as a response to the challenges. Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) became fully computer-based by 2015 with the objective of fighting malpractice and improving efficiency. The creation of the Central Admission Processing System (CAPS), a digital platform that automated admission offers was a great innovation in 2017. CAPS ensured that candidates actively participated in accepting or rejecting admission offers. CAPS monitored and regulated institutional admissions and candidates' acceptance of admission offers[6]. In 2020, COVID-19 pandemic led to modification to examination schedule with increased emphasis on online processes. To strengthen registration and admission validation, JAMB introduced integration with the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) in 2023. In other words, linking UTME registration to NIN - National Identification Number. Notwithstanding the achievements, the system remains deficient by allowing universities more autonomy within a regulated structure. Nigeria's centralized admission system under the management of Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) unintentionally limits polytechnics and colleges of education to secondary choices for applicants failing to obtain university admission. This tendency has resulted in the enrolment of graduates from these colleges suffering from low interest in technical professions or teaching, therefore compromising the quality of their outputs [7]. 30,731 applicants were accepted into the National Certificate in Education (NCE) programmes in 2021 out of 15,746 applications, suggesting that those who had no prior interest in education were enrolled to meet quotas. Additionally, Okoro and Adeyemi contend that a large number of people with poor academic preparation are pushed into professions where they do not have true career goals due to institutional bias in candidate placement. Consequently, these institutions—critical in developing quality educators and technical professionals—face a decline in the calibre of their student body, ultimately impacting the quality of training and teacher education. The misalignment between student interest and

institutional focus not only diminishes the reputation of these institutions but also undermines national efforts to build a robust technical workforce [8]. The intrinsic motivation required for high-quality learning diminishes when students are admitted into the polytechnics or colleges of education by default rather than choice. According to studies, uninterested or misallocated students are less likely to interact closely with their course material which results in fewer qualified graduates in their fields of work [9]. This lowering in the standard of technical education and training has long-term consequences for Nigeria's labour force. Poor career satisfaction hinders personal professional growth and lowers national production because professionals who do not have passion for their chosen industries are less likely to succeed and lead advancements in their sectors [10].

2. Materials and Methods

The portrayal of polytechnics and colleges of education as dumping grounds exhibits a systematic challenge in Nigeria education system. The concept comes from the inclination to transfer all the prospective students who cannot secure admission into the university to these institutions, notwithstanding their interest or aptitude. Inadvertently, this practice affects educational quality, workforce development, and national innovation capacity. Historically, polytechnics and colleges of education came into existence to provide specialized, practical, and pedagogical training needed for national development. These institutions have been relegated to secondary status because of societal liking for university degrees and structural approach to valuing academic education over technical and vocational training [11]. Akhuemonkhan and Raimi observed that the societal undervaluation of technical education leads to decreased student confidence, reduced institutional prestige, and a corresponding reduction in resource allocation and policy attention. Studies showed that many students enrolled in polytechnics and colleges of education do not have genuine interest but are there because they could not secure admission into universities. The resultant effect of this misalignment is usually low student engagement, poor academic performance, and high attrition rates. According to Adebayo and Obadeyi, the students' academic outcomes and professional readiness suffer when placed into programmes that do not match their interest and skills, undermining the objectives of these institutions [12]. Skill mismatch in the labour market was worsened by the stigmatization of technical and teacher education. Okoye and Imhonopi stated that there are shortage of technically skilled personnel and qualified teachers even when polytechnic and education graduates struggle to find employment due to perceived inferior training. This dichotomy shows the inefficiencies in the system that is bred by not treating polytechnics and colleges of education as vital engines of national development [13]. To strengthen these institutions, efforts must focus on systematic reforms that treat as important the ranking of technical and teacher education. Agboola and Omoyajowo maintained that it is very important to administer policies that encourage equality of respect between university degrees and polytechnics diploma and colleges of education certificates. Additionally, real career counselling and admissions reforms that treat as important student interest and talent are key to changing the dumping ground situation [14]. Moreso, a move from a societal point of view is necessary. Mustapha asserted that vocational and teacher education is highly respected and plays a vital role in economic competitiveness in Germany and Finland. Countries like Nigeria must learn from such examples. Without the change the underperformance, societal neglect, and workforce inefficiency will continue. The treatment of polytechnics and colleges of education as dumping grounds represents systemic and societal failures. Recognizing the important roles of these institutions in national development is truly the way countries can utilize the full prospects of their educational systems [15].

3. Results and Discussion

Mismatching students' career interests and the programme they are offered is one major problem. Ede et al. stated that the centralized system often admits students into technical and teaching courses against their initial choices. Poor motivation, low commitment to skill acquisition, and weak engagement in the learning process are because of students' notion about polytechnics and colleges of education as second- or third-tier options. The lasting effect is the production of graduates who lack the competence, passion and innovative spirit needed in the technical and education sectors [16]. Furthermore, the centralized system tends to favour universities by assigning candidates with high scores to them and low grades with low academic preparedness in the polytechnic and colleges of education. Technical and teaching Institution accept such students because of pressure to fill quotas. The "Quantity over quality" approach has contributed significantly to the lowering standards in technical and teacher education. Students with low academic preparedness find it difficult to cope with the practical-based learning requirements, leading to reducing the value of academic severity and lessening the technical competence of graduates [17]. Additionally, the individual needs of technical education were not taken into account in the one-size-fits-all nature of the CUAS. Polytechnics and colleges of education need candidates with certain natural ability and interests, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. However, the centralized admission approach places more importance to theoretical assessments with little regard for practical and technical skills [18]. Inadvertently, it leads to less than the highest standard achievements in both teaching and technical profession because students with very little technical propensity find themselves in programmes that require high levels of hands-on engagement. The fall in quality also tells on the reputation of technical institutions. Institutional performance indicators like graduation rates, professional certification pass rates, and employment outcomes bear as more students who are less motivated and off-the-cuff are admitted. This further gradually destroys public confidence and reduces the attractiveness of technical and teacher education profession [19]. The technical education sector will continue to graduate underperforming generation, threatening national development goals in education, technology, and human capital advancement without a reform that places more importance to what programme requires and candidate capability. Many students are placed into programmes where they neither have interest or talent because of the strict allocation process, often established merely on exam scores [20]. As a result, a reasonable part of students in teacher education, technical fields, and health sciences pursue careers they do not have innate motivation. This faulty match between student career aspirations and academic placement decreases career satisfaction after graduation and poor long-term professional dedication. Career satisfaction is positively influenced by first career choice motivations [21]. When students are forced into professions because of admission logjams in the system, their interest in the work gradually decreases. Moreover, this contributes to high turnover rates in very important sectors where professional commitment is critical to national development. The psychological burden is another challenge associated with being "pushed" into an unwanted career path. Ogunyemi and Lawal observed that students forced into programmes, during their academic journey often experience reduced academic engagement, lower self-efficacy, and increased dissatisfaction [22]. These intellectual encounters follow into their workplaces and show up as low job satisfaction, little effort toward professional growth, and poor rate of retention. Such results affect the productivity and performance of entire sectors in addition to reducing the career fulfillment of the individuals concerned. Furthermore, technical and teacher education institutions are unjustifiably affected by the CUAS system. Polytechnics and colleges of education turn "dumping grounds" for prospective students who could not get admission into esteemed universities [23]. Thus, graduates from these institutions often feel stigmatized, which further crumbles their professional pride and reduces their eagerness to fund continuous professional growth and excellence. The unintended consequences of Centralized Unified Admission System on career prospects and professionalism among students are increasingly evident, though it intended to democratize access to higher education. Sectors

critical to national development risk continued deterioration in workforce quality, morale, and sustainability without a systematic reform that places more importance to individual career aspirations and professional fitness [24]. The current centralized system generates inefficiencies that not only compromise the quality of education in vital sectors but also negatively influence the career paths of innumerable students. These realizations strongly support the call for a decentralized unified examination system that better matches students' interests and national development goals. A decentralized unified examination system which aims at aligning student preferences with what institutions offer while upholding assessment standards is proposed to address misalignment between students' interests and their fields of study unintentionally created by the centralized admission system in Nigeria [25]. A decentralized system would allow prospective students the opportunity to apply directly to their chosen institutions whether universities, polytechnics, or colleges of education tailored to their interests and career aspirations. This strategy guarantees that candidates are more invested and dedicated to their selected disciplines, hence improving educational outcomes. For example, research has indicated that students who gain admission through methods that take their preferences and strengths into account typically achieve better academic results [26]. It is important to maintain standardized assessments to uphold academic quality as decentralization grants autonomy to institutions. Implementing a common examination framework across all institutions will allow consistency and fairness in evaluating candidates' competencies.

- a. Automatic Reallocation Based on Choice and Cut-off Marks: Applicants would rank the institutions they want to attend when they are making the application in the proposed approach. An automated reallocation system would put them in their second or third choices, provided they match the corresponding requirements in a situation where they failed to meet the requirement for their first choice [27]. This approach respects individuals' choices and optimizes admission placements, reducing the chance of students being enrolled in programmes they are not interested in which can result in higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement.
- b. Leveraging Technology for Efficient Admission Processing: The admission process can streamline applications, assessments, and placements by incorporating technology. Digital platforms can increase smooth interactions between applicants and institutions, improving user experience and reducing administrative constraints [28]. Candidates' characteristics, interests, and performance can be analyzed to recommend appropriate programmes and institutions, making the admissions process personal and increasing the possibility of academic success by using AI-driven recommendation systems.

The disadvantages of the current centralized approach can be mitigated by transitioning to a decentralized unified examination system, helped by technological advances [29]. Nigeria can enhance the quality of its tertiary education admissions and outcomes by aligning student choices with institutional offerings and leveraging technology for efficient processing.

Several significant benefits are anticipated of the proposed Decentralized Unified Examination System in Nigeria's tertiary education.

- a. Enhanced quality of education and technical training: this match is important for improving the quality of graduates, particularly in technical and education sectors. Studies have demonstrated that placing students in programmes that match their interests improves their academic performance and skill acquisition, resulting in a more competent workforce [30]. Similarly, Adekola discovered a strong correlation between job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity among Nigerian university graduates, reinforcing the value of early career alignment.
- b. Increased professional satisfaction among students and motivation: this approach will reduce the probability of students feeling compelled into disciplines they do not have interest in, thereby increasing overall satisfaction and decreasing dropout rates. Studies indicated that educational systems which give importance to student choice and interest contribute to better levels of student engagement and success. Deci, et al, findings show that when students are given choices, they engage more deeply and

perform better academically. In addition to these findings, Slemph and Vella-Brodrick note that improving student choice based on personal interests not only increases motivation but also leads to higher emotional engagement, better academic performance, and enhanced personal development. Collectively, these studies confirmed that school systems which prioritize student choice and interest contribute significantly to better levels of student engagement and long-term success.

- c. Improved workforce productivity and national development: this scenario will bring about a more productive workforce that can boost innovation and make a meaningful contribution to the promotion of the country. Research continually emphasizes the relevance of matching educational pathways to students' interests and professional goals. For example, Oduwaiye, et al asserted that tailoring career options to individual interests improves job satisfaction and staff productivity. Similarly, Edeh, et al contended that educational guidance targeted to students' interests not only promotes career happiness but also acts as an important avenue for effective workforce development in Nigeria [31]. Osibanjo, et al found that career development activities based on personal interests and educational choices resulted in higher job satisfaction and performance levels. Collectively, these studies indicate that educational institutions that allow student choice and interest are crucial for developing engaged learners, satisfied professionals, and a more productive workforce.
- d. Increased Specialization and Institutional Autonomy: Decentralization allows educational institutions greater latitude to grow and specialize in ways that best suit their peculiar strengths and local needs. The importance of student autonomy and curiosity in promoting academic achievement has been emphasized by recent studies. According to Fredricks, et al. learning settings that place a high value on student autonomy greatly improve student engagement and academic performance. This insight is further supported by Wang and Eccles, who discover that consistent school engagement, motivated by student autonomy and interest, predicts improved academic achievement and favourable life outcomes [32]. Nigeria's postsecondary education system might be revitalized by moving to a decentralized unified examination system. The system can create a more driven student population, a skilled workforce, and institutions that are adaptable to the changing needs of the economy and society by placing a higher priority on student interest and institutional autonomy.

Transitioning to a decentralized unified admissions system promises to raise educational quality and boost national development by matching students' interests with their academic goals. To achieve the full benefit of this transformation requires careful planning, participatory policymaking, and strategic technology utilization [33].

- a. Government Policies and Legislative Framework: The Federal Ministry of Education, National Universities Commission (NUC), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) should work together to develop a policy framework for a decentralized unified system. The JAMB Act should be amended to recast its purpose as a regulatory and assessment authority, giving institutions more discretion over admissions.
- b. Stakeholder Engagement: Tertiary institutions, employers, educators, student groups, and parents should be engaged in conversations to achieve widespread support for the new system. Collaborative techniques guarantee that improvements are broadly supported and pertinent to the situation when implementing policies.
- c. Technological Adaptation: The use of technology is a requirement in the effective management of a decentralized unified admission system. Creating strong digital platforms may smoothen application procedures, evaluations, and placements. A robust digital platform (artificial intelligence) should be created to make sure there are smooth application procedures, evaluations, and placements.

4. Conclusion

This study has exposed the flaws of unintended repercussions for polytechnics and colleges of education in the Nigeria's centralized unified admission system. The existing system has relegated polytechnics and colleges of education to dumping grounds for individuals who cannot gain university admission. The existing system negatively impacts motivation, quality in teacher and technical education, workforce productivity and national development by placing individuals in professions they are not passionate about. A decentralized unified examination system was proposed to achieve a more effective and inclusive tertiary education system and encourage both merit-based and interest-driven admission.

- a. The system should allow prospective students to apply separately to universities, polytechnics, or colleges of education in line with their academic interests and career goals to ensure a more engaged and committed student body.
- b. The system should integrate an automatic reallocation process for candidates who do not meet the cut-off marks of their first-choice tertiary institution.
- c. The system should leverage modern digital platforms to ensure efficient, transparent, and timely admission processing.

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