



HIGHER EDUCATION AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

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Abstract

Nigeria faces a paradoxical challenge: a rapidly growing youth population with rising educational attainment coexists with persistently high unemployment rates, currently estimated at 53.4 percent among young people. This article provides a comprehensive review of skill development initiatives within Nigeria's higher education system, examining policy frameworks, implementation strategies, and outcomes. Drawing on recent government reports, peer-reviewed studies, and development organization publications (2024–2026), the analysis reveals that Nigeria has established a robust policy architecture for skills development, including compulsory entrepreneurship education, the National Graduate Employability Framework, and the revitalized Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system. However, significant implementation gaps persist: entrepreneurship education curricula face challenges of objective multiplicity and inadequate evaluation mechanisms; TVET suffers from underfunding and low societal valuation; and digitalization efforts encounter infrastructure constraints. Recent initiatives, including the Nigerian Youth Academy (NiYA), the TVET stipend program reaching over 42,000 students, and the ILO-supported skills reform dialogue, demonstrate renewed political commitment. The article concludes with evidence-based recommendations for policy coherence, stakeholder coordination, and sustainable financing to bridge the gap between educational outputs and labour market demands.

Keywords: *Higher education, youth empowerment, skill development, entrepreneurship education, TVET, & graduate employability*

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation defined by its youth. With over 60 percent of the population under 25 years and a median age of 17 years, the country possesses one of the youngest populations globally (Jonathan, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). This demographic structure presents both an extraordinary opportunity for economic growth and a significant risk if young people remain unemployed or underemployed. Current estimates indicate that youth unemployment stands at 53.4 percent, with approximately 80 percent of university graduates struggling to secure formal employment (Adejimola & Olufunmilayo, cited in Edeh et al., 2024; Jonathan, 2025).

In response to this crisis, successive Nigerian governments have implemented a range of policy interventions aimed at aligning higher education outcomes with labour market demands. The most significant of these was the 2004 national policy mandating compulsory entrepreneurship education across all higher education institutions, implemented through the National Universities Commission (NUC) directive (Edeh et al., 2024). Subsequent initiatives have included the establishment of entrepreneurship development centres, the expansion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and, most recently, the development of the National Graduate Employability Framework for Nigerian Universities (GEFNU) in partnership with the Commonwealth of Learning (National Universities Commission, 2025).

Despite this policy attention, graduate unemployment has continued to rise. This paradox, increasing educational attainment alongside worsening labour market outcomes, suggests persistent gaps between policy intent and implementation reality. This article reviews the current landscape of skill development initiatives within Nigeria's higher education system, examining policy frameworks, institutional mechanisms, implementation challenges, and emerging innovations. The review synthesizes recent empirical evidence from government documents, peer-reviewed research, and development organization reports published between 2024 and 2026.

Policy Landscape for Skill Development: Entrepreneurship Education Mandate

The cornerstone of Nigeria's skill development strategy is the compulsory entrepreneurship education policy introduced in 2004 and fully implemented by 2006 (Edeh et al., 2024). Under this directive, the National Universities Commission mandated that all Nigerian universities incorporate entrepreneurship education as a compulsory course for all undergraduate students. This policy was designed to shift graduates from job-seeking to job-creating mindsets, equipping them with the competencies, attributes, and attitudes necessary to establish and sustain enterprises (Edeh et al., 2024).

Following this mandate, most Nigerian universities established entrepreneurship development centres to support the embedding of targeted interventions. These centres coordinate activities including business plan competitions, mentorship programmes, and linkages with industry partners. The Federal Government also established complementary schemes through agencies such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the Student Industrial Working Experience Scheme (SIWES), and various vocational and technical training programmes (Edeh et al., 2024).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Reform

Technical and Vocational Education and Training has been identified as a critical pathway for youth empowerment, particularly for those not pursuing university education. Jonathan (2025) argues that TVET can be transformational in realizing youth empowerment, economic well-

being, and inclusive development in Nigeria. Despite its strategic importance, TVET has historically suffered from underfunding, low social valuation, and misalignment with dynamic labour market demands (Jonathan, 2025).

Recent policy attention has sought to address these gaps. In October 2025, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), convened a National Dialogue on skills development reform. The dialogue brought together government, employers' organizations, workers' unions, and civil society to strengthen Nigeria's TVET and apprenticeship systems to be more inclusive, responsive, and aligned with labour market needs (International Labour Organization, 2025).

A significant milestone was achieved in December 2025 with the commencement of direct financial payments to TVET students and training centres. Over 42,000 young Nigerians received monthly stipends of N22,500 to cover upkeep and transportation, while more than 600 independent technical and vocational training centres received payments for instructional and skills training (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). This initiative, launched under President Tinubu's Renewed Hope Agenda, represents a substantial investment in practical skills development.

The National Graduate Employability Framework

In April 2025, the National Universities Commission, in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning, held a validation workshop to finalize the National Graduate Employability Framework for Nigerian Universities (GEFNU). This framework represents a comprehensive approach to integrating employability skills, including technical competencies, soft skills, and work experience, into university curricula (National Universities Commission, 2025).

The framework was developed through a consultative process that began in October 2024. The April 2025 workshop, chaired by NUC Executive Secretary Professor Abdullahi Yusuf Ribadu, brought together stakeholders including academics, directors of career services, SIWES coordinators, entrepreneurship directors, industry representatives, and employers. The workshop's specific objectives included reviewing and refining the proposed framework, validating earlier stakeholder engagements, and developing an institutional framework for implementation (National Universities Commission, 2025).

Table 1: *Key Skill Development Policy Initiatives in Nigeria (2004–2025)*

Initiative	Year	Lead Agency	Key Features	Current Status
Compulsory Entrepreneurship Education	2004/2006	NUC	Mandatory entrepreneurship course across all HEIs; Entrepreneurship Development Centres	Ongoing; implementation quality varies
Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES)	1973 (revised)	ITF	Structured work experience for students in industry	Active; expanded reach
National Graduate Employability Framework (GEFNU)	2025	NUC / COL	Comprehensive employability framework; M&E mechanisms; pilot	Validated; awaiting full rollout

TVET Programme	Stipend	2025	Federal Ministry of Education	testing Monthly stipends for TVET students; payments to training centres	Active; 42,000+ beneficiaries
Nigerian Academy (NiYA)	Youth	2025	Federal Ministry of Youth Development	Digital literacy; technical skills; entrepreneurship; creative industries	Launched March 2025
National Employment Policy		2025	FMLE / ILO	Inclusive growth; decent work agenda; skills alignment	Adopted 2025

Source: *Author's Tabulation*

Entrepreneurship Education Outcomes

Despite the longevity of the entrepreneurship education mandate, evidence on its effectiveness remains mixed. A study by Igbo, Sakariyau, Paiko, and Adebisi (2024) examined the relationship between entrepreneurship education curriculum content and new venture creation among Nigerian graduates. The study observed that due to the multidisciplinary interest in the field of entrepreneurship, which gave rise to multiplicity of objectives, the development and design of entrepreneurship education curriculum content has faced significant challenges.

The researchers found that students are often unable to develop the needed confidence, commitment, and drive for achieving entrepreneurial goals and aspirations upon graduation. They recommended that efforts should be made to establish well-defined objectives and appropriate means of evaluating success through feedback from students, which can be incorporated into content development and review processes (Igbo et al., 2024).

A more extensive study by Edeh, Obodoechi, and Ugwu (2024), published in *Heliyon*, employed qualitative data from five focus groups and quantitative data from 151 students across four Nigerian universities to explicate the trends, successes, and challenges of entrepreneurship development and innovation support. The study found that while the policy framework is robust, implementation at the institutional level is highly variable. Factors affecting entrepreneurial aspirations included the quality of teaching, access to practical experiences, linkages with industry, and the availability of start-up support (Edeh et al., 2024).

Research by Ebiringa, Asiegbu, Ikerionwu, Emereole, and Ebiringa (2024) developed a novel employability model for enhancing job readiness among Nigerian graduates. The study, conducted in Nigeria's Southeast region (which consistently records the highest university enrollments annually), sampled 144 multi-stakeholder participants including 80 graduating students with cumulative grade point averages of 3.50 and above, 50 faculty and academic administrators, and 14 human resources managers.

The results revealed a complex pattern: in the short term, academic achievement and work-integrated learning had significant negative effects on job readiness outcomes, while in the long term, academic achievement became positive and significant. This finding suggests that the immediate transition from university to employment may be challenging even for high-achieving students, but that the benefits of quality education manifest over time. The authors concluded

that their novel employability model has a high likelihood of bridging the employability skills gaps of traditional training outcomes (Ebringa et al., 2024).

Jonathan (2025) examined sustainable practices in Technology and Vocational Education and Training, arguing for the incorporation of green skills, curriculum modernization, teacher education enhancement, and industry collaboration. The study found that sustainable TVET practices, including training in renewable energy, digital transformation competencies, and entrepreneurship development, can significantly increase graduate employability and contribute to national development goals such as climate action and industrialization. The study identified systemic problem areas including inadequate funding, low societal valuation, and weak alignment with labour market demands. It called for a paradigm shift in how Nigeria views and invests in technical education, positioning it not as an alternative pathway but as a foundation for a robust, green, and inclusive economy (Jonathan, 2025).

Idoko (2025) focused on the digitalization of science and technology instruction for entrepreneurial skills acquisition and youth empowerment. The study identified 21st-century digital tools and platforms, including Edapp, Arlo, CreateLMS, 360learning, and Coassemble that can empower Nigerian students to acquire entrepreneurial skills in specialized areas for sustainable development.

Prospects of digitalizing instruction include the application of skills in areas such as fashion designing, photography, and hairdressing, facilitating youth empowerment through interconnected skill acquisition across age groups and disciplines. However, the study highlighted significant challenges, particularly in developing countries: the digital divide among countries and institutions, as well as low power supply, remain substantial barriers to effective digital instruction (Idoko, 2025).

Recent Innovations and Emerging Initiatives

Nigerian Youth Academy (NiYA)

In March 2025, President Bola Tinubu launched the Nigerian Youth Academy (NiYA), an initiative designed to equip young Nigerians with skills to compete effectively on the global stage. The President, represented by Vice President Kashim Shettima, noted that NiYA would focus on three critical areas: education and skills development, economic empowerment, and leadership and civic engagement (The Guardian, 2025). The initiative was framed as a response to Nigeria's low human capital index ranking and the barriers to national progress. Within its first two years, the academy aims to train and empower millions of young Nigerians. At the launch event, six beneficiaries representing the six geopolitical zones each received N1 million as start-up packages to implement their programmes as self-employed and skilled youths (The Guardian, 2025).

TVET Financial Empowerment Programme

The Federal Government's TVET initiative, which commenced payments in December 2025, represents a significant investment in practical skills development. The first tranche of disbursements provided monthly stipends of N22,500 to over 42,000 young Nigerians, covering upkeep and transportation costs. Additionally, over 600 independent technical and vocational training centres received payments for instructional and skills training (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). The Honourable Minister of Education, Dr Maruf Tunji Alausa, stated that the rapid commencement of payments demonstrates the President's directive to invest aggressively in young people. The programme is designed to equip youth with

in-demand, practical skills as the fastest way to drive job creation, entrepreneurship, and national economic growth (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025).

Proposed Technical Colleges and Vocational Institutions

In July 2025, the House of Representatives moved to establish three new vocational and technical institutions: The Federal College of Entrepreneurship and Skills Acquisition in Zaki Biam, Benue State; the National Institute for Technical and Vocational Education in Bogoro, Bauchi State; and the Federal Vocational and Skills Acquisition College in Ilaro, Ogun State (New Telegraph, 2025). Speaker Tajudeen Abbas, represented by Hon. Auwal Gwadabe, emphasized that Nigeria must shift its educational focus toward practical and technical skills to address the alarming rate of youth unemployment. He noted that with the rise of emerging technologies including Artificial Intelligence, Robotics, and Big Data, it is no longer sufficient to focus solely on theoretical knowledge (New Telegraph, 2025).

ILO-Supported Skills Reform Dialogue

The October 2025 National Dialogue on skills development reform, supported by the ILO and GIZ, marked a significant step toward institutionalizing TVET and apprenticeship systems. The dialogue gathered stakeholders from government, employers' and workers' organizations, and civil society to strengthen Nigeria's skills development system to be more inclusive, responsive, and aligned with labour market needs (International Labour Organization, 2025). Key outcomes included a strong call to operationalize the National Skills Council Bill to improve governance and accountability in Nigeria's skills sector. The ILO pledged continued support through technical assistance, policy dialogue, and capacity building, reinforcing Nigeria's 2025 National Employment Policy and its vision for decent work and inclusive growth (International Labour Organization, 2025).

Table 2: *Recent Skill Development Initiatives: Scale and Scope*

Initiative	Launch Date	Beneficiaries/Scale	Key Focus Areas	Lead Agency
Nigerian Youth Academy (NiYA)	March 2025	Millions targeted over 2 years	Digital literacy; technical skills; entrepreneurship; creative industries	Federal Ministry of Youth Development
TVET Stipend Programme	December 2025	42,000+ students; 600+ centres	Monthly stipends; instructional payments	Federal Ministry of Education
Proposed Technical Colleges	July 2025 (legislation)	3 new institutions	Entrepreneurship; technical education; vocational skills	House of Representatives
National Skills Reform Dialogue	October 2025	Multi-stakeholder national consultation	TVET governance; apprenticeship systems; certification	FMLE / ILO / GIZ
GEFNU Implementation	April 2025 (validation)	All Nigerian universities	Employability framework; industry partnerships; curriculum integration	NUC / COL

Challenges Associated Skill Development

Research consistently identifies curriculum-related challenges as a primary constraint on effective skill development. Igbo et al. (2024) noted that the multiplicity of objectives in entrepreneurship education has led to curriculum content that lacks focus and coherence. Students are not adequately prepared to translate entrepreneurial knowledge into actual venture creation upon graduation. Similarly, Jonathan (2025) identified that TVET curricula often fail to incorporate emerging areas such as green skills and digital competencies, leaving graduates ill-equipped for evolving labour market demands. The study called for curriculum modernization and the integration of practical, industry-relevant content.

Inadequate funding remains a persistent barrier across all skill development domains. Jonathan (2025) documented that TVET suffers from chronic underfunding despite its strategic importance. The ILO-supported dialogue noted that sustainable financing mechanisms for skills development remain underdeveloped, with heavy reliance on government allocations and donor support (International Labour Organization, 2025).

Infrastructure constraints are particularly acute for digitalization initiatives. Idoko (2025) highlighted low power supply and the digital divide as significant barriers to effective digital instruction. Without reliable electricity and internet connectivity, digital platforms cannot deliver their full potential for skills development.

A significant cultural barrier is the low societal valuation of vocational and technical education. Jonathan (2025) noted that TVET is underrated in Nigerian society, often perceived as a pathway for those who cannot access university education. This perception affects enrollment, funding, and the quality of graduates attracted to the sector. The preference for white-collar employment, despite its scarcity, continues to shape educational choices. Edeh et al. (2024) noted that approximately 80 percent of graduates struggle with obtaining employment partially due to curricula that historically focused on obtaining white-collar jobs rather than entrepreneurial skills.

The multiplicity of agencies involved in skills development, including NUC, ITF, NBTE, NDE, and various ministries, creates coordination challenges. The ILO dialogue identified policy coherence as a critical area requiring improvement, with stakeholders calling for the operationalization of the National Skills Council Bill to improve governance and accountability (International Labour Organization, 2025). Ebiringa et al. (2024) noted that while policies exist, evaluation mechanisms are weak. The National Graduate Employability Framework seeks to address this through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms under the NUC's M&E and Accreditation Directorates, but implementation is still in early stages (National Universities Commission, 2025).

Way forward

Addressing curriculum challenges requires a systematic approach to objective-setting and evaluation. Igbo et al. (2024) recommended that well-defined objectives and appropriate means of evaluating success through feedback from students should be incorporated into content development processes. This would enable continuous curriculum refinement based on outcomes data. Jonathan (2025) called for curriculum modernization to incorporate green skills, digital competencies, and entrepreneurship development. TVET institutions should align their programmes with emerging labour market demands, including renewable energy, digital transformation, and sustainable agriculture.

The TVET stipend programme demonstrates the potential of direct financial support to increase access and completion rates. However, sustainable financing mechanisms beyond ad hoc government allocations are needed. The ILO dialogue emphasized the importance of private sector involvement and innovative financing models (International Labour Organization, 2025). The National Employment Policy provides a framework for aligning skills development with economic priorities. Ensuring adequate budget allocation and exploring co-financing arrangements with industry partners could enhance sustainability.

University-industry partnerships are critical for bridging the gap between education and employment. Edeh et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of collaborative processes that gather and combine inputs from industry stakeholders and policymakers, with universities facilitating and coordinating these relationships. The Graduate Employability Framework explicitly calls for fostering strong partnerships with industry, employers, and alumni to ensure long-term sustainability (National Universities Commission, 2025). Formalizing these partnerships through memoranda of understanding, joint programme development, and work-integrated learning arrangements should be prioritized.

Digitalization of instruction offers significant potential for expanding access to skills development. However, infrastructure deficits must be addressed. Idoko (2025) recommended investment in reliable power supply and internet connectivity to enable effective digital instruction. Public-private partnerships could accelerate infrastructure development while sharing costs. Training for educators is equally important. The digital platforms identified—Edapp, Arlo, CreateLMS, 360learning, Coassemble, require not only technical infrastructure but also faculty capacity to use them effectively. Investment in teacher education and professional development should accompany digital infrastructure investments.

Conclusion

Nigeria has established a robust policy architecture for skill development within its higher education system. The entrepreneurship education mandate, now two decades old, has created institutional structures and awareness. Recent initiatives such as the National Graduate Employability Framework, the TVET stipend programme, the Nigerian Youth Academy, and the ILO-supported skills reform dialogue, demonstrate renewed political commitment and strategic direction. However, significant implementation gaps persist. Entrepreneurship education curricula require refinement and evaluation mechanisms. TVET continues to struggle with underfunding and low societal valuation. Digitalization efforts face infrastructure constraints. Coordination across the multiple agencies involved in skills development remains fragmented.

The evidence reviewed suggests that policy coherence, stakeholder coordination, and sustainable financing are essential for bridging the gap between educational outputs and labour market demands. As Nigeria's youth population continues to grow, the urgency of effective skill development cannot be overstated. The initiatives launched in 2024–2025 provide a foundation; sustained implementation, monitoring, and adaptation will determine whether these initiatives achieve their transformative potential.

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