

Global Trends and Challenges in Adult and Non-Formal Education: A Nigerian Perspective

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Abstract

Adult education encompasses all structured educational initiatives designed for adults and youth, regardless of content, location, or mode of delivery. These programs are characterized by their flexibility, enabling them to address the unique needs, aspirations, and contexts of the learners and their communities. This paper explores current trends in adult education and critically examines persistent challenges such as inadequate funding, low remuneration for facilitators, shortage of well-trained personnel, ineffective record-keeping systems, and the prevailing apathy among the target population. Despite these challenges, adult education holds significant promise. Its potential benefits include enhanced national productivity, the development of a skilled workforce, improved literacy rates, a reduction in maternal and infant mortality rates, and the promotion of lifelong learning and skill acquisition. The study concludes by proposing actionable recommendations, including increased government investment, improved compensation for facilitators, professional development for educators, efficient data management practices, and comprehensive community mobilization efforts to ensure greater participation and sustainability.

Keywords: Adult Education, Educational Trends, Challenges, Prospects, Lifelong Learning

Introduction

The history of adult education is a story of mixed outcomes marked by ambitious goals, promises, and expectations, but often ending in modest achievement, neglect, and frustration. While adult education has been integrated into broader educational and developmental agendas, it has frequently been limited to a narrow interpretation, primarily focused on literacy skills (Wordu & Emesiobi 2023). In many developing countries, where resources are limited, adult education often takes a backseat to other priorities within the education system.

After World War II, the importance of adult and non-formal education was recognized by many nations as an essential tool for individual and national progress. In Africa, for example, ex-servicemen who interacted with white soldiers during the war recognized the transformative power of education. As a result, there was a heightened demand for education that addressed everyday life challenges (Nzeneri, 2016). Unfortunately, socio-economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors have restricted many individuals' access to education, contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to Education (1948). Consequently, a significant portion of the population, particularly adults, have not benefited from formal education systems, with many dropping out at various stages. These adults, often classified as illiterate or semi-literate, are the most affected by these barriers.

Adult education has the power to transform individuals socially and psychologically, more profoundly than many other fields. It restores hope, challenges preconceived notions about their ability to learn, and empowers them to recognize their potential, both in terms of their environment and their personal capabilities. This process not only benefits individuals but also contributes to broader national development (Wami & Emesiobi, 2024).

Defining adult education is a complex endeavor, as it is interpreted and applied in diverse ways across contexts and cultures. However, a general consensus among scholars is that adult education refers to organized learning opportunities specifically designed for individuals who are considered adults. This naturally raises the question: Who qualifies as an adult?

Adulthood can be defined through various lenses biological, chronological, psychological, economic, political, and social. Nzeneri (2016) describes an adult as an individual who is physically and psychologically mature, as well as socially, economically, and politically responsible. Chukwuemerie et al (2020) emphasizes that the definition of adulthood is context-dependent and can vary significantly across societies and historical periods. Criteria for defining adulthood may include legal benchmarks (such as

eligibility to vote, drive, or serve in the military), societal roles (such as marriage or parenthood), economic independence, or the assumption of social responsibilities.

UNESCO (1976) proposes that an adult is any individual aged 18 years or older an internationally recognized standard for legal, educational, and policy purposes. Further, the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) defines adult education as encompassing all forms of lifelong learning both formal and informal aimed at enhancing the skills, knowledge, and competencies of adults, thereby addressing personal aspirations and broader societal needs (UNESCO, 2009, as cited in Wordu & Emesiobi 2023).

UNESCO (1976), as cited in Nzeneri (2016), expands on this definition by including all organized educational activities, regardless of their content, level, or method of delivery, whether formal or informal. This broad categorization includes educational programs that either supplement or replace conventional schooling, such as those offered in schools, colleges, universities, technical institutions, or through apprenticeship schemes. The primary objective of these programs is to help adults improve their practical skills, expand their knowledge base, upgrade their professional or technical qualifications, and transform their attitudes and behaviors. Ultimately, adult education fosters both personal development and active participation in the social, economic, and cultural advancement of communities.

Together, these definitions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding adult education not only in terms of its definition but also its wide-ranging scope and content.

The Objectives of Adult Education

The National Policy on Education (2014) outlines several key objectives for adult education:

- i. To provide functional literacy and continuing education for adults and youth who have either never had the chance to attend formal school or did not complete their primary education.
- ii. To offer functional and remedial education for young people who were unable to finish secondary school.
- iii. To deliver in-service, vocational, and professional training for various categories of workers to improve their skills.

- iv. To provide adult citizens with essential aesthetic, cultural, and civic education for public awareness.
- v. To offer education aimed at improving the knowledge and skills of individuals who have completed the formal education system, focusing on income-generating activities like carpentry, tailoring, knitting, soap and pomade making, and other local crafts.

Programs in Adult and Non-Formal Education

The National Benchmark for Non-Formal Education (NFE) in Nigeria outlines the following programs:

1. **Basic Literacy** – A literacy program designed for individuals who have never attended school, aimed at teaching basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. The duration typically ranges from six to nine months, with four hours of instruction per week, equivalent to three years of lower basic education.
2. **Post-Literacy** – This program targets graduates of basic literacy programs who wish to further their education. It equates to six years of primary education and lasts between 12 and 18 months, offering nine hours of instruction per week.
3. **Continuing Education** – Aimed at post-literacy graduates, this program helps individuals acquire Junior or Senior Secondary School Certificates, or remedy deficiencies in their earlier education. It may also be referred to as Extra-Mural, Open and Distance Education Learning, Remedial Education, or Workers' Education, among others.
4. **Vocational Education** – A non-formal education program designed to provide learners with vocational skills. The duration depends on the trade or craft, with agreements made between the organizers and the learners (NMEC/UNICEF, 2010).

Adult Education Trends

Adult education is adapting to meet the needs of a rapidly changing economy and the evolving interests of learners in the 21st century. Below are some notable trends:

Out-of-School Boys' Education

Economic pressures, disinterest in schooling, and early engagement in income-generating activities are major causes of boys dropping out. Ogunode (2021) introduced the term "early school leavers" to mitigate the stigma of "dropouts.". UNICEF's situational analysis (2008) noted dropout rates reaching

71% in Imo and Enugu. More recent reports (UNICEF, 2022) indicate persistent dropout patterns due to socio-economic challenges and inadequate policy response in South-East Nigeria.

Girl-Child Education Programs

Efforts to promote female education are ongoing, especially in northern Nigeria. The Basic Education Gender Strategy (2025) aims to reduce gender disparity by funding scholarship programs, providing school meals, and constructing girl-friendly schools in states like Zamfara and Sokoto.

Aliyu and Musa (2023) confirmed the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies in increasing school attendance and retention among girls.

Integrated Quranic Education

Blending Quranic instruction with basic education addresses the literacy gap among Almajiri children. Students learn Arabic and Roman script, civic skills, and health literacy. This model has been adopted in several northern states under the National Policy on Almajiri Education (2021). Umar and Bichi (2022) emphasized that integrating religious with secular education improves enrolment and social mobility.

Literacy by Radio

Radio remains an effective medium for promoting adult literacy in remote areas. The NMEC “Literacy by Radio” initiative in 2022 reached over five million learners nationwide. The Lagos “Mooko Mooka” radio program boosted literacy comprehension rates by 30%, according to Oladipo and Adebayo (2023), who tracked radio learners in Lagos and Ogun states.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

ODL provides flexible access to adult learners, particularly those who missed formal education. Programs by NOUN and various state universities allow adults to earn certifications while working. According to Edewor and Asabe (2021), ODL boosts participation and retention rates among working-class and rural learners.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

ICT integration has enhanced adult learning by offering online modules, digital literacy classes, and mobile-based learning tools.

Ugwu and Umezuruike (2023) showed that ICT-based learning in Oyo and Enugu states improved flexibility and learner confidence. Similarly, The Himalayan Journal (2020) found digital tools increased retention and digital skills among adult learners.

Challenges in Adult Education

Adult education faces several challenges, including:

Neglect by the UBE Act: The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act still gives minimal attention to Adult and Non-Formal Education (NFE), undermining its importance despite adult learning being integral to lifelong education. This institutional neglect hinders policy enforcement and reduces visibility (Ogunode, 2021; Adamu & Bello, 2022).

Inadequate Funding: Budgetary allocations for NFE remain disproportionately low. NMEC (2022) emphasized that most states allocate less than 1% of their education budgets to NFE, far below UNESCO's recommendation of 6%. Additionally, transparency and accountability issues persist (Ogunode et al., 2021).

Poor Remuneration of Facilitators: Many facilitators are paid irregularly or not at all. The national benchmark of ₦7,500 is rarely upheld. Research by Eze and Ibrahim (2023) found that over 70% of facilitators in northern states had not received pay in over three months, which demoralizes staff and reduces teaching quality.

Unfavorable Working Conditions: Adult education facilitators often operate in poor conditions dilapidated learning centers, lack of instructional materials, and unpaid work. According to Afolabi and Oyebanji (2021), these conditions hinder productivity and discourage professional commitment.

Inadequate Qualified Facilitators: Although the minimum required qualification is an NCE (NMEC, 2020), many facilitators still hold only Grade II certificates or lack formal training in adult learning methodologies. This mismatch leads to ineffective teaching (Adewale & Ibrahim, 2021).

Poor Record-Keeping: Lack of accurate data on enrollment, progress, and transition disrupts planning. NMEC (2021) reported that less than 30% of adult learning centers maintain up-to-date records, which hampers program evaluation and funding.

Low Participation Rates: Only 1.7 million out of 44 million targeted adults are enrolled in NFE annually. At this rate, it would take over three decades to meet national literacy goals (NMEC, 2023). Factors such as stigma, time constraints, and lack of incentives contribute to poor turnout (Umar & Hassan, 2020).

Irregular Program Monitoring: Inconsistent monitoring and lack of timely feedback slow program improvement. Monitoring visits are often skipped due to underfunding, affecting quality assurance (Ojo & Umeh, 2021).

Inaccessibility: High costs of instructional materials and registration fees deter learners, especially in rural areas. According to Okechukwu and Ajayi (2022), many adult learners are economically disadvantaged, making these costs a major barrier to access.

Poor Publicity: There is limited awareness about the availability and value of adult education. Ogunode et al. (2021) stressed that without sustained publicity and community engagement, adult literacy programs will remain underutilized and undervalued.

Prospects for Adult and Non-Formal Education

The prospects for Adult and Non-Formal Education (NFE) in Nigeria are as follows:

1. **Increase in Productive Capabilities:** A well-educated adult farmer, for instance, will not only know when and how to apply fertilizers, but also understand how to improve productivity using modern farming technologies. This can lead to a significant increase in the country's Gross National Product (GNP).
2. **Improved Literacy Levels in the Labor Force:** Better-educated individuals within any given occupation are likely to perform their tasks more efficiently. Additional education can increase awareness of better methods and practices. Literacy contributes to the individual's ability to: develop a more open and positive mindset towards life and related activities, accept and adopt

changes and innovations that can enhance productivity, improve health habits, which in turn impacts their ability to contribute effectively to the economy, as a sickly person cannot be as productive, generate ideas and insights that can help others improve their performance within the economy.

3. **Reduction in Maternal and Infant Mortality Rates:** Educated mothers are more capable of caring for both their own health and that of their children. They are also more likely to attend prenatal and postnatal clinics regularly.
4. **Transformation of Individuals, Communities, and Societies:** Education fosters the transformation of individuals, communities, and entire social structures, driving social and economic progress.

Conclusion

The current trends in adult education in Nigeria reveal that inadequate funding remains a critical barrier to effective program implementation, significantly contributing to persistently high levels of adult illiteracy. As the adult population constitutes the backbone of national productivity and governance, the quality and empowerment of this demographic are essential for sustainable development.

Adult education holds immense potential to advance national progress; however, to realize this potential, it must be reimagined and aligned with global educational standards and best practices. For Nigeria to fully benefit from adult education, there must be a strategic repositioning of its programs to address the dynamic needs of a rapidly evolving society. Only through comprehensive reform and committed investment can adult education serve as a catalyst for meaningful national transformation.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are made to improve Adult and Non-Formal Education in Nigeria:

1. More centers and programs should be established, ensuring that they are accessible and affordable. Essential programs, such as Basic and Post Literacy, should be made free across all states of the Federation.
2. The National Assembly should amend the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act to formally incorporate adult and non-formal education as an essential subsector.

3. Facilitators should be compensated in line with the minimum standards outlined in the Non-Formal Education (NFE) blueprint, with salaries or allowances reflecting the minimum wage.
4. Facilitators in NFE centers should hold the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), with a specialization in adult education, to ensure quality delivery.
5. There should be sufficient recruitment of staff at all levels to meet the growing demand for adult education services across the country.

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