



**JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT (JET)**

**A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF  
ADULT EDUCATION, FACULTY OF EDUCATION,  
UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS**

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## Examining the Place of Adult Education in Nigeria's Digital Literacy Policies

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17234885>

### Abstract

In an attempt to unravel the recognition given to Adult Education (AE) in Nigeria's digital literacy policies, this work took a deep look into three vital or legal national documents – the Nigerian 1999 Constitution (as amended), the National Policy on Education (2013), and the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC) Act (1990) – to reveal their positions or provisions on AE. However, the major task was to trawl through four policy documents, namely, the National Digital Learning Policy (2023), the National Digital Literacy Framework (2023), the National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy (2012), and the National Policy on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education (2019) to establish if appreciable provisions or considerations are given to AE. While the vital or legal documents truly serve as the primary sources of existence for AE based on their relevant provisions, the four digital literacy policies examined, although they have substantial provisions for education at various levels, they have no clear-cut or sufficient provisions for Adult Education. It was also revealed that there was no proper coordination or collaboration among the federal ministries in formulating digital literacy policies. This paper recommendation recommended adequate, clear and comprehensive provisions for AE in future or revised digital literacy policies; federal ministries and agencies should work towards a harmonised version of digital literacy policy documents; and the federal government should rather partner or collaborate with the state governments to formulate and implement nation-wide initiatives to ensure such programmes reach the target or grass-root beneficiaries and the impacts are felt bottom-up.

**Keywords:** Adult, Adult Education, Digital Literacy, Federal System, Policy.

**Pg. 193. JET 9:2, 2025**

## Introduction

A well-prepared digital literacy policy document may be described as a sacred document because of its potency to achieve far-reaching transformation across an entire nation if well-implemented as part of a national education policy. In Nigeria, the federal government has made some attempts to utilize digital literacy policies as instruments for socio-economic transformation. However, the way federal system is being practised in Nigeria leaves much to desire.” Over the years, the federal government has accumulated more authority, often at the expense of state and local governments” (Pol.Sci. Institute, 2024).

The federal system of government that Nigeria constitutionally operates has three (3) tiers of government, namely federal, state and local governments – one federal government, thirty-six state governments and 774 local government areas. While the federal government has exclusive constitutional powers to make laws and policies on certain issues, some of these powers are shared with the state governments. Education is one of the areas where both the federal and the state governments can concurrently make laws and policies. This means both could make laws and policies on education. In summary, there is one Federal Ministry of Education, while there are thirty-six Ministries of Education at the state level in Nigeria.

This paper discusses the federal government digital policies with a view to revealing the considerations and provisions made for adult education in national digital policy documents. Four of the policies were reviewed to determine whether some of the existing policy documents adequately address the needs in adult education or consider the needs of adult learning programmes provided in the papers.

A policy or a policy document could be considered as an essential action and direction document of a well-organised system. In the words of Howlett and Ramesh (2003), “Policy is a set of decisions and actions taken by governments to address specific problems.” However, in this paper focuses on digital literacy policies in Nigeria in relation to their provisions for adult education.

There are various or different existing digital literacy or learning policies in Nigeria, which were formulated and are being implemented by government ministries or agencies at national level. However, only four (4) of those policies were examined. They were carefully dissected with a view to finding out if they had provisions, considerations or benefits for adult education as an academic field of study and as a programme for adult learners.

This work also presents some facts about Nigeria. Other components contained in this work include definition of key concepts; fundamental legal documents for adult education programmes; ministries and agencies with relevant roles on digital literacy in Nigeria; findings; conclusions; and recommendations.

### **Definition of Key Concepts**

#### **Adult**

Many authors, researchers, scholars and organisations have defined and continue to define what it really means to be an adult in a way that reflects or projects the horizon of their studies or understanding. This makes it expedient to state that there is no generally accepted definition of who an adult is. However, there is the need to consider a few in this paper.

Oladapo (2010), attempts to conceptualize what constitutes an adult by dividing adulthood into three stages: “early adulthood (18 to 30 years), middle adulthood (31 to 55 years), and late adulthood (56 years and above).” In some cases, one is considered an adult if he/she has attained voting age or is eligible to participate in political activities or an electoral process.

From the above definitions, it can be deduced that different factors were considered in all the above definitions. They include physical or biological development, psychological maturity, age, and societal considerations.

Conclusively, an adult could be described as someone who has attained certain age (usually between 18 and 21 years) and met other adulthood criteria set by the society to which he/she belongs or lives.

## **Adult Education**

Having considered various definitions of what constitutes adulthood, defining adult education leaves little to grapple with. However, it is necessary to consider a few given by different entities.

According to the UNESCO (2016) in a broad definition adopted in 1976, adult education is “the entire body of organised educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and university as well as apprenticeship, regarded as an adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical and professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes and behaviours in two-fold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development.” From its definition of who an adult is, one can deduce that adult education is the form of education given to a category of persons who are regarded as adults by the society they belong.

The National Education and Research Development Council (2013), in National Policy on Education, captures adult education in the same set with mass literacy and non-formal education under “Mass and Nomadic Education”, and says “it is the equivalent of basic education given to adults, children and youths of formal school age outside the formal school system.”

Bakare (2013) views adult education as “an alternative education for those at any age, group and level of education, who seek education outside the traditional compulsory education milieu.” After considering a number of definitions, Obashoro (2017) inferred that “... the issue of educational purposes is stressed, no matter the culture, background or discipline of the definer.”

One may surmise that adult education is any form of educational programme, planned and implemented outside the conventional school setting or system for the benefit of those considered adults by their society, to achieve positive social change.

## **Digital Literacy**

Digital Literacy is another phrase that is serially defined by scholars and non-scholars in ways that delineate the depth and width of their thoughts, research and experience. In this digital age, definitions on digital literacy are abundant while many more will continue to emerge.

In the work of Antoninis (2018), “Digital literacy is the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic and social life.” He further states that, “It includes competences that are variously referred to as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy, and media literacy” (Antoninis, 2018). Eshet-Alkalai (2004) sees digital literacy as the variety of cognitive-thinking techniques that consumers of digital information employ.

Digital literacy can be viewed as the knowledge or basic skills to use digital devices for communication, information or achieve intended learning outcome. To some extent, it encompasses the use of computers, internet services, camera, software applications, Artificial Intelligence, smart devices, etc.

## **Policy**

Policy is a common word in education and other fields and sectors. It has undoubtedly attracted the attention of researchers who have given it various definitions that suit their findings. Kraft and Furlong (2013) define policy in view of public policy as “a course of action or inaction chosen by government to address a problem or issue.” Birkland (2016) says “Policy is a statement of intent or a set of guidelines that guide decision-making.”

One could define a policy as a set of principles, guidelines, or rules that guide decision-making and behaviour within organisations, governments, or institutions. Policies are designed to achieve specific goals, address problems, or promote certain values

Basically, a policy is an official document that contains a plan of what to be done, its goals or objectives and the guidelines on how it is to be done, which sometimes include the Key Performance Indicators and evaluation procedure.

### **Key Legal Documents on Adult Education Programmes and Digital Literacy in Nigeria**

All existing policies on adult education and digital learning or literacy in Nigeria derived their sources of existence from the fundamental legal documents mentioned as follows:

#### **1. The Nigerian 1999 Constitution**

The Nigerian 1999 Constitution (as amended) has some influential recognition for Adult Education, technology and other education-related laws or legislations made in Nigeria. The constitution, which is supreme to any laws or policies in Nigeria, provides that “Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels” (Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) Section 18 (1)). Section 18 (2) says, “Government shall promote science and technology,” while Section (3) mandates government to “eradicate illiteracy and provide free primary education, free secondary education, free university education and **adult literacy programme**.” No law or policy on education at any level can override or should be inconsistent with those constitutional provisions.

#### **2. National Policy on Education (2013)**

The National Policy on Education (NPE) is the Nigerian national document that spells out “the guidelines, objectives, standards, structures, strategies, and management for achieving the national education goals in Nigeria” (National Education and Research Development Council, 2013). The policy was introduced in 1977 but its current version was revised in 2013.

Concerning Adult Education, Section 4 of the NPE makes provision for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education, and states some of its goals which includes to “Provide functional basic education for adults and youths who have never had the advantage of formal education or who left school too early,” and “Provide remedial and life-long education for youths and adults who did not complete secondary education” (NERDC, 2013).

### **3. National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC) Act (1990)**

This Commission was established under an Act in 1990 with a mandate to “design and promote strategies and programmes for the conduct and implementation of a National Mass Literacy Campaign in consultation with appropriate agencies of the Federal and State Governments, the universities and non-governmental agencies” (Law Nigeria, 2018).

The Commission is a parastatal under the Federal Ministry of Education, saddled with the responsibility of managing and implementing policies, projects and programmes in respect of mass literacy, adult and non-formal education at the national level in Nigeria.

### **Digital Literacy Policy Documents and their Provisions for Adult Education**

This section examines four (4) digital literacy documents and their considerations for adult education.

#### **1. National Digital Learning Policy (2023)**

This National Digital Learning Policy of 2023 was put together by the Federal Ministry of Education, and announced in May 2023. According to its mission statement, the policy is “To leverage basic and applied research in digital pedagogy to enhance digital learning.”

### **Provisions or Considerations for Adult Education**

The policy makes general provisions for all levels and forms education, including Adult Education (AE). However, it does not make a clear or comprehensive provision for adult education. AE falls under generic consideration without being explicitly mentioned. The nearest provision that has some level of consideration for adult education, especially for educators or practitioners, comes as one of the policy objectives, which is to “Improve the quality and relevance of digital learning by ensuring the provision of quality content while supporting educators to integrate technology into teaching and learning process” (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023).



## **2. National Digital Literacy Framework (2023)**

This policy framework was introduced in 2023 by the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA). However, it was reviewed and presented as a collaborative project with the Federal Ministry of Education in 2024. The main target of this framework is to “achieve a digital literacy rate of 70% by 2025 and 95% by 2030” (NITDA, 2024).

### **Provisions or Considerations for Adult Education**

The Framework has generic consideration for Adult Education (AE) together with other forms or levels of education in Nigeria. The provision for continuing professional development of teachers is the main consideration that has a link with AE which has to do with training and certification of teachers on digital literacy with the expectation that they will be well equipped with digital skills and knowledge.

## **3. National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy (2012)**

The National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy was announced in 2021 by the then Ministry of Communication and Technology with a mission “To fully integrate Information and Communication Technologies into the socio-economic development of Nigeria, in order to transform Nigeria into a knowledge-based economy” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2012).

### **Provisions or Considerations for Adult Education**

The policy has no clear-cut or direct provision for Adult Education (AE). However, it has the education sector as one of the sectors the policy targets and intends to transform. Therefore, it could be inferred that there is no direct or comprehensive provision for AE.

## **4. National Policy on Information and Communication (ICT) in Education (2019)**

This National Policy on ICT in Education was introduced by the Federal Ministry of Education in 2019 to create a guiding document that would provide a clear direction and deliberate efforts to achieve ICT-driven educational system in Nigeria. The policy focus areas are “Human Capital

Development, Infrastructure, Research and Development, Awareness and Communication, Governance, Financing, and Monitoring & Evaluation” (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019).

### **Provisions or Considerations for Adult Education**

The policy focuses on education in a general perspective with no comprehensive consideration for adult education. The policy statement sums it up thus, “Government shall provide appropriate legal, regulatory and security framework to ensure that ICT in education and the conduct of related activities are focused on achieving ICT-enhanced education” (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019).

### **Federal Ministries and Agencies with Relevant Roles on Digital Literacy in Nigeria**

- The Federal Ministry of Education
- The Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy
- The Federal Ministry of Innovation Science and Technology
- National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA)
- National Orientation Agency (NOA)
- National Broadcasting Commission (NBC)

### **Findings**

The findings of this work were discovered from four digital literacy policy documents examined. However, there are other policy documents that were not examined, which might have some provisions or considerations for AE. Therefore, the findings are only limited to the four documents.

1. In the digital policies reviewed, there were appreciable provisions for education at secondary and tertiary levels, while the provisions or considerations given to adult education (AE) (either as an academic programme, a sub-sector of education or a social service for social change) were scanty.
2. In most of the digital policies and programmes researched, AE was lumped with non-formal and other forms of education. This makes adult education have no clear considerations in the policy documents.

3. The considerations that could be likened to AE in the digital policies examined were more beneficial to teachers and other professionals, to enable them acquire digital skills and support their professional development desires in digital literacy.
4. Though the digital policies were formulated by different ministries under one federal government, they (the policies) contain same or highly similar contents or statements which deal with digital literacy, digital learning and continuing professional development. This is unnecessary when the ministries could jointly come up with one policy document as a national agenda.

### **Conclusion**

The federal government of Nigeria has implemented and still implementing different digital literacy policies, that were developed to promote digital learning and utilization of ICT devices among Nigerian youths, adults and professionals. This paper has considered four (4) of the various digital or ICT-related policies formulated and/or implemented in Nigeria by federal ministries or agencies between 2012 and 2025.

The contents of the documents examined prove that Nigeria has robust digital literacy policies for to transform the education sector and achieve far-reaching socio-economic development. However, deliberate efforts should be geared towards ensuring AE takes its ideal place in the education sector through policy documents. It was clearly established that there were no adequate provisions for AE in the digital literacy policies and programmes examined.

### **Recommendations**

Having examined the four documents on digital literacy policy, the following recommendations are provided:

1. Digital Literacy Policy and Framework documents should be properly formulated to ensure adequate, clear and comprehensive provisions are made for AE, whether education is considered as a sector, an academic programme or a social service.

2. Federal ministries and agencies should work towards a harmonized version of digital literacy policy documents. This would help prevent duplication of policies of same or similar objectives and lead to achieving an all-encompassing drive and far-reaching effects.
3. The federal government should desist from implementing nation-wide digital literacy programmes or projects that are meant to benefit citizens at state and local levels. It should rather partner or collaborate or support the state governments to formulate and implement such initiatives with the participation of the local governments. This is to ensure the programmes reach the target or grass-root beneficiaries and the impacts are felt bottom-up.
4. Rather than lumping AE practitioners, facilitators and learners with students, educators, teachers and practitioners in a policy, clear and comprehensive provisions should be made for AE educators and practitioners in this regard.

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