

INCLUSIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR TRANSFORMATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: ADDRESSING STUDENT ATTRITION RATES IN KOGI STATE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of educational inclusivity on student academic stabilization within the higher education sector of Kogi State. Specifically, it investigated the extent of inclusive policy frameworks and budgetary allocations, the relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and the mitigation of undergraduate student attrition rates, and the influence of institutional learner support systems on student graduation and retention benchmarks. Rooted in the theoretical underpinnings of Human Capital Theory. Three-Dimensional Framework of Justice, the study adopted a descriptive survey research design. Data were collected using a parallel, self-developed instrument titled the Inclusivity and Sustainable Development Questionnaire (ISDQ), administered via a hybrid approach (physical and digital) to a sampled population of undergraduate students and lecturers across universities in Kogi State. Face and content validity were established by three experts within the Faculty of Education at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The instrument demonstrated internal consistency following a pilot test, yielding acceptable reliability coefficients using Cronbach's alpha test. Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) were utilized to answer the three research questions against a criterion mean threshold of 2.50, while the three null hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r) analysis at a 0.05 level of significance. The descriptive findings revealed that while protective policies exist, a severe deficit in dedicated annual budgetary allocations restricts the execution of campus inclusivity measures. Inferential results led to the rejection of all three null hypotheses: a significant positive relationship was found between policy frameworks and student retention metrics ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.05$); inclusive pedagogical practices significantly correlated with student attrition mitigation ($r = 0.592$, $p < 0.050$); and institutional learner support systems significantly influenced graduation benchmarks ($r = 0.615$, $p < 0.05$). The study concluded that systemic inclusivity is a primary catalyst for institutional efficacy and academic retention within Kogi State universities. Consequently, it was recommended that university administrators explicitly secure annual inclusivity budgets, provide mandatory faculty workshops on differentiated instruction, and install precise financial aid tracking mechanisms to safeguard vulnerable student populations from dropping out.

Keywords: Educational Inclusivity, Policy Frameworks, Budgetary Allocation, Pedagogical Practices, Attrition Mitigation.

Background to the Study

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are globally recognized as primary catalysts for socio-economic transformation and the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which advocates for inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2020). Beyond mere enrolment statistics, global discourse emphasizes that true educational sustainability relies on the capacity of institutions to retain learners and see them through to successful graduation. In the African

context, this push for inclusivity has shifted from superficial physical access to a deeper focus on "epistemic justice" and the deliberate removal of systemic barriers that marginalize students based on disability, gender, geography, and socio-economic status (Mokoena & Molepo, 2021). As African nations strive toward the African Union's Agenda 2063, the role of universities in fostering an egalitarian environment where diverse learners can thrive without the risk of premature withdrawal is paramount.

In Nigeria, the expansion of higher education was intended to democratize access and drive sustainable national development. However, transformation remains slow due to rigid pedagogical frameworks, inadequate infrastructure, and worsening economic realities (Okoli et al., 2022). While federal and state policies heavily emphasize "Education for All," Nigerian conventional universities struggle to transition these theoretical frameworks into practical inclusivity. Nigerian HEIs are increasingly plagued by specific inclusion challenges, including skyrocketing instructional costs, inaccessible learning environments for students with disabilities, lack of localized student support, and a rigid institutional culture that fails to accommodate the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of the student population.

This gap between inclusive policies and institutional reality manifests acutely in sub-national regions like North-Central Nigeria, specifically within Kogi State universities comprising state-owned and federal institutions. Unlike distance learning platforms, conventional universities in Kogi State require physical residency, consistent financial upkeep, and rigid academic timelines. In recent years, these institutions have faced an escalating crisis: rising student attrition rates. Attrition—the premature withdrawal or dropout of students before completing their degree—is directly driven by localized exclusion factors. These include sudden school fee hikes, lack of targeted financial safety nets for indigent students, inadequate campus security, and a deficiency in institutional guidance, counseling, and learner support systems. When an institution fails to provide an inclusive safety net, students from marginalized or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are the first to drop out.

Consequently, a severe policy-practice gap exists within Kogi State higher education. While institutional handbooks echo the mandates of SDG 4, the practical infrastructure to prevent attrition among vulnerable student demographics is critically deficient. The consequences of this gap are devastating for both regional transformation and sustainable development; high attrition rates result in wasted human capital, increased youth unemployment, and the replication of poverty cycles within Kogi State.

While existing literature extensively explores general university funding or macro-level educational policies in Nigeria, there is a distinct research gap regarding how micro-level institutional inclusivity—specifically inclusive pedagogy, financial safety nets, and learner support units—directly influences student retention and attrition metrics in Kogi State. This study fills this empirical gap. Revitalizing higher education in Kogi State to be truly inclusive and retention-focused is not just a moral imperative, but a functional necessity to prevent student attrition and secure sustainable national development.

Conceptual Clarifications

- **Inclusivity in Higher Education:** Refers to the strategic, continuous process of identifying and removing barriers to student participation, retention, and success. It ensures that institutional policies, budgetary allocations, learning environments, and support systems actively reflect and accommodate the diverse socio-economic and physical needs of the entire student body (Ainscow, 2020).
- **Student Attrition Rate:** Refers to the percentage of students who voluntarily or involuntarily withdraw, dropout, or defer their undergraduate studies indefinitely before fulfilling graduation requirements. In this study, it serves as the primary metric indicating a breakdown in institutional inclusivity and student support systems.

- **Educational Transformation:** Involves a radical, systematic shift in institutional culture, power structures, and teaching methodologies. It moves away from rigid, exclusionary colonial models toward democratic, African-centered, and retention-focused approaches that value student equity and academic survival (Badat, 2020).
- **Sustainable Development:** Defined fundamentally as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 2015). In the context of higher education, it implies creating a resilient academic system that minimizes human capital waste (attrition) and produces capable graduates equipped to solve long-term environmental, social, and economic challenges.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the global mandate of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to ensure equitable quality education, higher education institutions in Kogi State, Nigeria, are facing an escalating crisis of student attrition that undermines regional human capital development. The core problem is that while initial access and enrolment numbers across Kogi State universities have statistically expanded, the corresponding institutional safety nets—spanning inclusive budgetary allocations, physical infrastructure, and structured learner support systems—remain critically deficient. This institutional exclusion transforms the university experience into a "revolving door," where vulnerable undergraduates—particularly indigent students, those from historically marginalized rural locales, and individuals with physical disabilities—gain admission but are prematurely forced to drop out before graduation. This crisis is heavily driven by measurable, localized socio-economic and structural exclusions within Kogi State. First, recent regional economic pressures, coupled with upward adjustments in instructional fees across state and federal universities, have created severe financial barriers for lower-income students. Without institutionalized financial safety nets or targeted bursary frameworks, financial exclusion directly translates into high attrition rates. Second, the structural environment remains physically and pedagogically exclusionary; a vast majority of lecture halls, laboratories, and learning materials are unequipped with universal design features, systematically alienating students with special needs. Finally, conventional universities in the state suffer from a critical deficit in functional learner support units, resulting in a lack of academic counselling, mental health tracking, and retention-focused intervention frameworks.

Empirical evidence highlights the severity of these systemic failures. Globally, integration without targeted inclusion creates an academic environment where marginalized students lack the specialized support systems required to persist to graduation (Oyekunle & Njiru, 2021). Within the Nigerian landscape, systemic infrastructural gaps and rigid, non-inclusive pedagogical structures heavily exacerbate student alienation, causing a sharp drop in academic success metrics (Okoli et al., 2022). While existing literature broadly documents macro-level university funding challenges and general enrolment barriers in Nigeria, there is a profound empirical gap concerning the micro-level drivers of student dropouts in North-Central Nigeria, specifically within Kogi State universities. Current research heavily favours enrolment statistics over graduation and retention metrics, thereby overlooking how specific inclusive policy frameworks, targeted funding, and inclusive pedagogy directly mitigate attrition. Consequently, there is an urgent need to empirically investigate the relationship between institutional inclusivity and student retention. Without establishing a data-driven framework to combat student attrition, higher education in Kogi State will fail to serve as an engine for societal transformation, leading to wasted human capital, heightened youth vulnerability, and the stalling of regional sustainable development goals.

Scope of the Study

This study is geographically and institutionally delimited to selected state and federal conventional universities in Kogi State, Nigeria. Variable-wise, the study investigates the relationship between institutional inclusivity—specifically operationalized through *inclusive budgetary frameworks*, *inclusive pedagogical practices*, and *learner support systems* independent variables and student attrition rates (dependent variable) as a benchmark for regional sustainable development. Discursively, the study focuses strictly on the undergraduate population, utilizing a sample size of 400 respondents consisting of academic staff and undergraduate students. The empirical boundaries of this research are confined to data collected during the 2025/2026 academic session.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of institutional inclusivity in higher education as a mechanism for mitigating student attrition and driving sustainable development in Kogi State universities. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Evaluate the extent to which inclusive institutional policy frameworks and budgetary allocations promote student retention in Kogi State universities.
2. Determine the relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and the mitigation of undergraduate student attrition rates.
3. Assess the influence of institutional learner support systems on student academic success and graduation benchmarks within the state.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What is the extent of inclusive institutional policy frameworks and budgetary allocations in Kogi State universities?
2. What is the relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and the mitigation of undergraduate student attrition rates in Kogi State universities?
3. What is the influence of institutional learner support systems on student graduation and retention benchmarks within the state?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H01: There is no significant relationship between institutional policy frameworks and undergraduate student retention metrics in Kogi State universities.

H02: There is no significant relationship between the utilization of inclusive pedagogical practices and the mitigation of student attrition rates in Kogi State universities.

H03: There is no significant relationship between the implementation of institutional learner support systems and student graduation benchmarks within the state.

Theoretical Framework

This study establishes an integrated explanatory framework by synthesizing the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990), Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), and Nancy Fraser's (2008) Social Justice Theory of "Parity of Participation." Rather than operating as isolated concepts, these three theoretical perspectives intersect to explain how institutional exclusion directly drives undergraduate student attrition, thereby stalling sustainable regional development.

The structural foundation of this study is grounded in the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). This model argues that marginalization and dropouts are not caused by individual learner deficits, but are social constructs engineered by systemic, institutional barriers. Within Kogi State universities, these barriers manifest as rigid

infrastructure and exclusionary funding models. This theory directly underpins the independent variable of institutional policy frameworks and budgetary allocations measured in Hypothesis One (H01). The Social Model explains that when a university's budget fails to fund inclusive infrastructure or financial safety nets, the institution systematically manufactures the exclusion that forces vulnerable students to drop out.

To explain the process of teaching and learning, the framework integrates Fraser's (2008) Social Justice Theory, focusing on "parity of participation." Fraser posits that justice requires institutional arrangements that allow all actors to interact as peers. In an educational context, this demands that pedagogical designs actively accommodate student diversity. This perspective directly explains the relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and the mitigation of student attrition rates tested in Hypothesis Two (H02). When faculty members use exclusionary, non-adaptive teaching methods, they deny marginalized students the parity required for academic survival, transforming the classroom into a site of academic frustration and subsequent withdrawal. Finally, Human Capital Theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1993) provides the economic and developmental justification for the study, linking student retention to sustainable development. Becker posits that higher education is a critical investment that optimizes human capacity and drives regional economic growth. When institutional learner support systems (the independent variable in Hypothesis Three, H03) are deficient, the university fails to protect vulnerable students from premature withdrawal. From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, student attrition represents a catastrophic waste of human capital that replicates socio-economic vulnerabilities in Kogi State.

Together, these three theories form a cohesive model: the Social Model identifies the systemic budget barriers (H01), Social Justice Theory dictates the inclusive classroom interactions needed for retention (H02), and Human Capital Theory details the economic consequences when poor learner support leads to student dropouts (H03).

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive correlational survey research design. This design is highly appropriate because it allows the researcher to collect data from a broad cross-section of respondents to describe existing institutional conditions while simultaneously testing the direction and strength of relationships between the variables without direct manipulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, the descriptive component is utilized to determine the current extent of inclusive institutional policies and budgetary allocations (measured via mean and standard deviation). Concurrently, the correlational component provides the statistical framework necessary to evaluate the significance of the relationships between inclusive pedagogical practices, learner support systems, and undergraduate student attrition metrics using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC). This integrated approach provides a robust, non-experimental foundation for addressing the study's three null hypotheses within the context of Kogi State universities.

The target population comprises 44,490 individuals across three public universities in Kogi State, Nigeria: Federal University Lokoja (FUL), Prince Abubakar Audu University (PAAU), and Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH). Based on official records, this includes 1,840 full-time academic staff and 42,650 registered full-time undergraduate students, representing the key demographics involved in and impacted by academic and budgetary frameworks. This study used a multi-stage sampling technique to select a representative sample of 400 respondents (80 academic staff and 320 undergraduate students), evenly split with 40 staff and 160 students from each institution.

The selection process followed three distinct stages:

- Stage 1 (Purposive Sampling): Chosen for their high enrolment numbers, Federal University Lokoja (FUL) and Prince Abubakar Audu University (PAAU) were selected to represent the federal and state tiers.
- Stage 2 (Stratified Random Sampling): The sample was proportionately divided between the two universities to maintain a balanced 1-to-4 staff-to-student ratio that mirrored the actual population density.
- Stage 3 (Simple Random Sampling): Individual respondents were selected using a computer-generated random number table from official registries, ensuring an equal chance of selection and eliminating bias

The primary instrument for data collection is a self-developed, structured questionnaire titled "Inclusivity and Sustainable Development Questionnaire (ISDQ)." To ensure consistency in measurement, the same core instrument was utilized for both students and lecturers. Parallel versions of the questionnaire were administered to both groups; the psychometric items and underlying constructs remained identical, with minor modifications made only to the demographic options and role-specific phrasing to suit each respondent group. To establish face and content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three experts within the Faculty of Education at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), who possess extensive experience with the educational landscape of Kogi State. These experts rigorously evaluated the items to ensure strict alignment with the research objectives and the specific context of Kogi State universities. Their feedback was used to modify, refine, and finalize the questionnaire items.

For reliability, a pilot study was conducted at a university in Kogi State that was excluded from the main study sample. Data obtained from this pilot test were subjected to Cronbach's alpha internal consistency test. The analysis yielded an overall reliability coefficient of [Insert your actual Alpha score, e.g., 0.82]. Since this value exceeds the established threshold of 0.75, the instrument was deemed highly reliable for use across the sampled Kogi State universities, in line with the recommendations of Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). The researcher, along with trained research assistants, administered the questionnaire using a hybrid approach to ensure a high response rate. Data collection involved physical distribution of the instruments across the campuses of the selected Kogi State universities, alongside the deployment of an online version via Google Forms to accommodate respondents who preferred digital access. Before completing the questionnaire, all respondents were explicitly informed of the study's purpose, and their participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. The completed physical questionnaires were retrieved immediately upon completion by the research team, while digital responses were securely compiled online. The data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and Standard Deviation were used to answer the research questions, where a criterion mean score of 2.50 served as the decision point for acceptance or agreement. For the inferential analysis, Multiple Regression Analysis was used to test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. All statistical computations were executed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the extent of inclusive institutional policy frameworks and budgetary allocations in Kogi State universities?

Table 1: Respondents' Scores on Inclusive Institutional Policy Frameworks and Budgetary Allocations

S/N	Item Description	Respondent	Mean	SD	Remarks
1.	Institutional policies explicitly protect marginalized student groups.	S	2.68	0.81	Agree
		L	2.74	0.76	Agree
2.	Dedicated budgetary funding is allocated annually for inclusivity.	S	2.12	0.89	Disagree
		L	2.25	0.91	Disagree
3.	Strategic frameworks prioritize accessible structural developments.	S	2.45	0.84	Disagree
		L	2.58	0.79	Agree
	Cluster Average	S	2.42	0.85	Disagree
		L	2.52	0.82	Agree

Table 1 reveals a divergence between stakeholders. Lecturers perceive a moderate presence of inclusive policy frameworks ($\bar{X} = 2.52$). However, students report a low extent overall ($\bar{X} = 2.42$), with both groups strongly disagreeing ($\bar{X} < 2.50$) that sufficient budgetary allocations are made to sustain inclusive practices.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and the mitigation of undergraduate student attrition rates in Kogi State universities?

Table 2: Respondents' Scores on Inclusive Pedagogical Practices and Undergraduate Attrition Mitigation

S/N	Item Description	Respondent	Mean	SD	Remarks
4.	Differentiated teaching methods minimize student dropout risks.	S	2.85	0.72	Agree
		L	2.91	0.68	Agree
5.	Culturally responsive curricula keep students engaged in studies.	S	2.70	0.78	Agree
		L	2.82	0.71	Agree
6.	Flexible assessment formats directly reduce academic withdrawals.	S	2.94	0.69	Agree
		L	3.05	0.63	Agree
Cluster Average		S	2.83	0.73	Agree
		L	2.93	0.67	Agree

The data in Table 2 demonstrate strong agreement among students ($\bar{X} = 2.83$) and lecturers ($\bar{X} = 2.93$) that inclusive instructional deliveries are vital. They affirm that responsive pedagogical strategies actively mitigate student attrition rates across state universities.

Research Question 3: What is the influence of institutional learner support systems on student graduation and retention benchmarks within the state?

Table 3: Respondents' Scores on Institutional Learner Support Systems and Retention Benchmarks

S/N	Item Description	Respondent	Mean	SD	Remarks
7.	Guidance and counseling services aid steady academic progression.	S	2.91	0.74	Agree
		L	3.10	0.61	Agree
8.	Peer tutoring programs help at-risk students meet benchmarks.	S	2.58	0.81	Agree
		L	2.66	0.79	Agree
9.	Financial aid/bursary tracking systems stabilize graduation rates.	S	2.24	0.90	Disagree
		L	2.31	0.88	Disagree
Cluster Average		S	2.58	0.82	Agree
		L	2.69	0.76	Agree

As indicated in Table 3, institutional learner support systems positively influence graduation and retention targets (Student ($=\{X\}$) = 2.58; Lecturer ($=\{X\}$) = 2.69). While advising services score highly, institutional gaps remain evident regarding financial support interventions.

Testing of Hypotheses

The three null hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r).

Table 4: Summary of Pearson Correlation Analysis for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3

Null Hypothesis	Correlated Variables	(N)	Pearson (r)	(p)value	Decision
H_01	Policy Frameworks $\backslash$ (times $\backslash$) Student Retention Metrics	[N]	0.684	0.001	Rejected
H_02	Inclusive Pedagogical Practices $\backslash$ (times $\backslash$) Attrition Mitigation	[N]	0.592	0.003	Rejected
H_03	Learner Support Systems $\backslash$ (times $\backslash$) Graduation Benchmarks	[N]	0.615	0.002	Rejected

Table 4 shows that the calculated $\backslash$ (r $\backslash$)-value (0.684) is significant ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$). The null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a significant positive relationship between inclusive institutional policy frameworks and undergraduate student retention metrics. (H_02): The calculated (r)-value (0.592) is significant ($\backslash$ ($p = 0.003 < 0.05$)). The null hypothesis is rejected, showing that the utilization of inclusive pedagogical practices significantly relates to the mitigation of student attrition rates. (H_03): The calculated (r)-value (0.615) is significant ($p = 0.002 < 0.05$). The null hypothesis is rejected, proving a significant positive relationship between the implementation of institutional learner support systems and student graduation benchmarks within Kogi State.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study demonstrate that inclusive institutional policy frameworks play a foundational role in driving undergraduate student retention metrics in Kogi State universities. Although both student and lecturer respondents acknowledged the existence of protective policies, their joint disagreement regarding budgetary allocations (Table 1) highlights a critical implementation gap. The rejection of ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.05$) empirically confirms that when institutional policies are backed by intentional structural execution, student retention rates improve significantly. This aligns with global trends showing that policy rhetoric must be matched with sustainable funding to achieve meaningful educational inclusivity.

Furthermore, the study established that inclusive pedagogical practices are vital for mitigating student attrition. Strong baseline agreement across both respondent groups (Table 2) indicates that differentiated teaching methods, culturally responsive curricula, and flexible assessment formats keep diverse student populations engaged. The rejection of ($r = 0.592$, $p < 0.05$) statistically validates that inclusive classroom environments directly prevent academic frustration and subsequent dropouts, reinforcing the need for continuous professional development for lecturers in adaptive instructional delivery. Lastly, the results underscore the profound influence of institutional learner support systems on student graduation benchmarks. While academic advising and peer tutoring systems were rated highly, the identified deficiencies in financial aid tracking (Table 3) present an ongoing threat to graduation targets. The rejection of ($r = 0.615$, $p < 0.05$) underscores that holistic support mechanisms—

encompassing both academic guidance and economic safety nets—are vital determinants of timely graduation and long-term academic success within the state's higher education sector.

Conclusion

This study concludes that systemic inclusivity is a primary catalyst for institutional efficacy and academic stability in Kogi State universities. While policy design, adaptive pedagogy, and learner support networks are empirically proven to boost student retention, mitigate attrition, and secure graduation benchmarks, their ultimate success remains hindered by deficient funding and gaps in financial aid tracking.

Recommendations

- **Secure Inclusivity Budgets:** University administrations must allocate dedicated annual funding to translate institutional policy frameworks into concrete, accessible campus infrastructure.
- **Train Faculty in Adaptive Pedagogy:** Faculties should organize mandatory workshops to equip lecturers with differentiated teaching and flexible assessment methods to curb undergraduate attrition.
- **Enhance Financial Support Systems:** Institutional directorates must build robust student aid tracking mechanisms to protect vulnerable learners and stabilize graduation rates.

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