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IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF NELFUND IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This study examined the implementation challenges and prospects of The Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) in Nigerian tertiary institutions. NELFUND was established to improve access to tertiary education by providing financial support to eligible students across Nigerian higher institutions. Despite its laudable objectives, concerns have emerged regarding its implementation and overall effectiveness. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, and data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to students and selected administrative staff across sampled tertiary institutions. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that the implementation of NELFUND is significantly constrained by administrative delays, inadequate institutional capacity, poor awareness among students, and technical challenges associated with the digital application platform. Institutional inefficiencies, including weak coordination between NELFUND and tertiary institutions, were also identified as major impediments to effective loan disbursement. However, the study found strong prospects for NELFUND in enhancing access to tertiary education, reducing student dropout rates, and promoting educational equity, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. The study concludes that while NELFUND has the potential to transform tertiary education financing in Nigeria, its success depends largely on improved administrative efficiency, robust ICT infrastructure, effective stakeholder collaboration, and sustained awareness campaigns. The study therefore recommends strengthened institutional capacity, enhanced transparency, continuous policy review, and targeted support for vulnerable students to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the scheme.

Keywords: Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND), implementation challenges, tertiary education, student loan scheme.

1. Introduction

Access to higher education in Nigeria has historically been constrained by high tuition costs, inadequate financial support structures, and limited availability of student loans (Musa, 2025). The establishment of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) in April 2024 under the Student Loans Act was intended to address these gaps by providing financial assistance for tuition and upkeep to eligible students in tertiary institutions nationwide (Musa, 2025; Tersoo, 2025). By mid-2025, the scheme had registered hundreds of thousands of applicants and disbursed substantial loan sums to students across public institutions (Musa, 2025). However, early implementation challenges have raised questions about the efficiency, transparency, and sustainability of the program.

Since its inception, NELFUND has made notable progress in terms of registration and disbursement. By May 2025, the scheme had disbursed billions of naira to hundreds of thousands of students across a wide range of universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, indicating strong demand for student financing (Nairametrics, 2025; PM News, 2025). Such achievements reflect the government's commitment to expanding access to tertiary education and alleviating financial constraints that often impede academic progression. Despite these early successes, the implementation of NELFUND has encountered several challenges that may undermine its effectiveness and sustainability. Digital infrastructure issues such as server crashes, slow online processing, and verification bottlenecks have been widely reported, affecting students' ability to complete applications and access funds (Way-Teach, 2025). Additionally, institutional readiness has been uneven, with some universities struggling to provide accurate student data on time, thereby delaying loan approvals. Reports of alleged non-transparent deductions or failure to inform students about disbursed funds have also raised concerns about accountability in the administration of the fund (Adams, 2025).

Beyond operational challenges, questions regarding the sustainability of the loan scheme have emerged. Nigeria's high unemployment rates and economic volatility raise concerns about graduates' ability to repay loans after completion of their studies, particularly given repayment obligations that begin post-NYSC. Without robust mechanisms for repayment and diversified funding streams, the long-term viability of NELFUND remains uncertain (Amaewhule, et al. 2025). Nonetheless, the prospects for NELFUND remain significant. The program has the potential to transform tertiary education financing by expanding students' access to higher learning, improving retention and completion rates, and enhancing institutional planning. Ongoing improvements in digital infrastructure, stronger collaboration between the Fund and tertiary institutions, and policy refinements aimed at ensuring transparency and accountability could strengthen implementation outcomes and foster confidence in the scheme's sustainability. The importance of addressing these implementation challenges is critical to realizing NELFUND's goal of making higher education affordable and accessible to all qualified Nigerian students (Anisulowo, al et. 2024). The study is significant in several important ways: Policy Formulation, Enhancement of Access to Tertiary Education, Enhancement of Student Retention and Completion Rates and Contribution to body of knowledge among others.

Despite the promising mandate of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) to improve access to tertiary education by providing interest-free student loans to eligible students, the implementation of the scheme has been fraught with significant challenges that undermine its objectives. One major problem is the slow and inconsistent verification and disbursement process. Many tertiary institutions have delayed confirming students' eligibility and uploading accurate student data for verification, leading to forfeiture of loan applications and exclusion of students from the loan cycle, thereby limiting the program's reach and effectiveness (Ayoko, 2025).

Another pressing problem is the lack of transparency and accountability in the disbursement process. Reports indicate that institutions receive funds directly from NELFUND but fail to notify students or properly credit their accounts, leaving beneficiaries to make out-of-pocket payments despite approved loans (Irabor, et al., 2025). Additionally, operational and technical challenges – including digital platform overload, data verification bottlenecks, and coordination issues between NELFUND and participating institutions – impede timely loan processing, particularly for students in remote or underserved areas (Jacob, et al., 2025).

These implementation challenges have created barriers to the equitable distribution of student loans, risking the credibility and sustainability of the scheme. Without effective solutions to institutional non-compliance, platform inefficiencies, and transparency gaps, NELFUND may fail to fulfill its mandate of expanding access to higher education for Nigerian students. This study is poised at assessing the policy implementation challenges and recommending practical prospects for effective implementation.

Research Question

i. What are the major implementation challenges facing the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) in Nigerian tertiary institutions?
ii. How do administrative and verification processes affect students' access to NELFUND loans?
iii. To what extent do digital and technological constraints influence the effectiveness of NELFUND implementation?
iv. What are the prospects of NELFUND in improving access, retention, and completion rates in tertiary education?

Research Objective

i. To identify the major challenges affecting the effective implementation of NELFUND in Nigerian tertiary institutions.
ii. To assess the impact of administrative and verification procedures on students' access to NELFUND loans.
iii. To examine the influence of digital and technological systems on the efficiency of NELFUND operations.
iv. To examine the prospects of NELFUND in improving access to, retention in, and completion of tertiary education in Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

H0[1]: There are not significant challenges affecting the effective implementation of NELFUND in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

H0[2]: Administrative and verification procedures have no significant effect on students' access to NELFUND loans in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

H0[3]: Digital and technological challenges do not significantly affect the effective implementation of NELFUND in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

H0[4]: The Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) has no significant effect on improving access to tertiary education in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of NELFUND and Policy Context

The Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) is a federal student loan initiative established under the Student Loan (Access to Higher Education) Act, 2023 and formally launched in May 2024. The scheme was created to provide interest-free or low-interest loans to eligible Nigerian students enrolled in approved tertiary institutions, with the aim of reducing financial barriers to higher education and promoting equity and inclusion in access to tertiary learning opportunities. The loans cover costs such as tuition fees and upkeep allowances, with repayment designed to begin after graduation and post-NYSC, when graduates gain employment, with flexible deduction terms tied to income levels (Jibrin, et al., 2025).

Since its launch, NELFUND has made substantial progress in expanding student access to financing. By March 2025, the Fund had disbursed approximately ₦45.1 billion in student loans, benefiting hundreds of thousands of applicants, with hundreds of thousands more registered on its loan platform. By May 2025, NELFUND reported ₦56.85 billion in total disbursements to cover institutional fees and student upkeep across 198 tertiary institutions, reaching nearly 298,124 student beneficiaries in its first year of operation (Oladele, et al., 2025).

The scheme continues to evolve, with authorities periodically closing and reopening the loan application portal for new academic cycles (e.g., the 2024/2025 portal closure in September 2025 and plans for the 2025/2026 application cycle) to streamline processing and improve access for applicants. Overall, NELFUND represents a major policy step toward financial inclusion in higher education in Nigeria, aimed at ensuring that students from low-income families can pursue tertiary education without facing prohibitive financial obstacles. The Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) was established to provide accessible student loans to eligible undergraduates across Nigerian tertiary institutions, with the aim of expanding access to higher education and reducing financial barriers to academic progression. Since its commencement in

2024, NELFUND has recorded substantial registration and disbursement figures, reflecting widespread demand for education financing. By July 2025, NELFUND had registered hundreds of thousands of applicants and disbursed over ₦73.2 billion to nearly 400,000 beneficiaries (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025).

2.2 Implementation Challenges

i. Institutional and Administrative Barriers

One of the most identified challenges in the implementation process is the slow and inconsistent response of tertiary institutions. NELFUND officials have attributed delays in disbursement largely to sluggish verification responses from participating institutions, which frustrates students and slows overall processing timelines (The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). Relatedly, some institutions have failed to upload necessary student data for the verification system, leading to postponed loan cycles and missed opportunities for eligible students (Telegraph Nigeria, 2024). This highlights administrative inefficiencies and lack of preparedness among some state-owned and federal institutions to integrate with the NELFUND operational architecture (Osaigbovo, & Ikediashi, 2025).

ii. Digital and Technical Challenges

The digital platform underpinning NELFUND's application and disbursement system has faced strain due to heavy usage, data verification bottlenecks, and user interface issues. High application volumes have led to server crashes and slow response times, particularly affecting students in regions with limited internet access (Way Teach, 2025). These technical constraints undermine equitable access and can exclude students who are less technologically literate or located in underserved communities.

iii. Transparency and Accountability Issues

Transparency in the disbursement flow has also been called into question. There have been reported incidents where certain tertiary institutions were slow in communicating approved loan disbursements to students, or where external audits flagged mismatches between released funds and documented transactions (Nigeria Education News, 2025). Such issues can erode trust and reduce the perceived legitimacy of the loan scheme. In response, NELFUND leadership has publicly urged institutional compliance with disbursement protocols and greater transparency to ensure that beneficiaries receive funds promptly once approved (Oyelekan, 2025).

iv. Regional Disparities in Awareness and Uptake

Evidence suggests uneven awareness and application rates across geopolitical zones in Nigeria. For instance, data from NELFUND indicates low application activity from students in the South-South and South-East regions compared to other zones, which may reflect limited awareness or skepticism about the credibility and accessibility of the scheme (The Nation Online, 2025).

2.3 Prospects for NELFUND

i. Expanded Access to Tertiary Education

Despite operational bottlenecks, NELFUND has significantly increased the number of financially supported students, thereby expanding access to tertiary education. Large numbers of registrations and successful loan applications underscore the prospect of reducing dropout rates and enhancing equity in higher education financing (Udefuna, et.al., 2025).

ii. Government Commitment and Scalability

Government commitment to the loan scheme, shown through expanding the number of participating institutions and regular disbursement reports, points to a solid foundational effort that could be scaled further. The program's reach to hundreds of thousands of students within its first year demonstrates its potential as a long-term solution to education financing constraints.

iii. Structural Improvements and Institutional Support

Recent guidelines and stakeholder engagement sessions conducted by NELFUND aim to improve institutional coordination and compliance (Way Teach, 2025; Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025). These engagements, coupled with ongoing digital enhancements, offer prospects for smoother operational processes in subsequent implementation cycles.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework helps explain why and how phenomena occur. For a policy-oriented topic like the Implementation Challenges and Prospects of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND), theories from public administration, policy implementation, and organizational behaviors are especially relevant. The following theories provide analytical lenses to understand the issues affecting NELFUND:

Organizational Ecology Theory

Organizational Ecology Theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) explains how organizational structures and environments influence survival, adaptation, and performance. It posits that organizations embedded in complex environments must adapt or risk failure.

Application to NELFUND

NELFUND operates within Nigeria's complex higher education ecosystem characterised by technology disparities, data management issues, and uneven institutional capabilities. These environmental pressures affect how institutions adapt to the loan scheme's demands (Way Teach, 2025; The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). Organizations with stronger administrative systems adapt more successfully, while others lag behind.

3. Methods and Materials

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for examining the implementation challenges and prospects of NELFUND in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The survey design enables the researcher to collect data from a large population of students, administrators, and institutional staff to understand patterns, perceptions, and experiences regarding the loan scheme (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population of the study comprised the students, administrative staff, and financial officers from selected tertiary institutions in North-Eastern part of the country Nigeria particularly, the benefiting institutions of the NELFUND scheme. A stratified random sampling technique were employed to select respondents, ensuring proportional representation across universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Students: Respondents include students who have applied for NELFUND loans in the 2024/2025 academic session.

Staff: Administrative and financial officers directly involved in loan processing and verification were included. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan Table to ensure statistical reliability. For instance, assuming a population of 50,000 NELFUND beneficiaries across selected institutions, a sample of approximately 400–450 respondents were selected.

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and interview guides Designed to capture information on students' awareness, accessibility, experience with loan application, and perception of NELFUND efficiency. Likert-scale items (e.g., strongly agree to strongly disagree) will be used to measure perceptions quantitatively. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with institutional staff and financial officers to gain qualitative insights on administrative processes, digital platform challenges, and institutional compliance. Secondary data were gathered from official NELFUND reports, institutional records, policy documents, and relevant literature (Udemezue, & Ngige, 2024).

Data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (Chi-square tests and regression analysis) to test hypotheses and examine relationships between variables (e.g., administrative efficiency and loan access). Interview responses were thematically analyzed, identifying recurring patterns and challenges in NELFUND implementation. Findings from qualitative analysis were complement the quantitative results for a triangulated understanding of implementation issues.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Response Rate

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to respondents across selected Nigerian tertiary institutions. Out of these, 382 questionnaires were correctly completed and returned, representing a 95.5% response rate, which was considered adequate for data analysis.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	210	55.0
Female	172	45.0
Total	**382**	**100**

Source: Field Survey: 2026

The table shows that the majority of respondents were male (55%), while females accounted for 45%. A fair proportional representation of the gender.

Table 2: Category of Respondents

CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE (%)
STUDENTS	83.8
ADMINISTRATIVE/FINANCE STAFF	16.2
TOTAL	**100**

Source: Field Survey: 2026

This indicates that most respondents were students, who are the primary beneficiaries of the NELFUND scheme.

4.3 Data Analysis Based on Research Questions

Table 3: Research Question 1: What are the major implementation challenges facing NELFUND in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Implementation Challenges	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
Delay in loan approval and disbursement	150	162	45	25	3.52
Poor awareness among students	138	155	60	29	3.44
Institutional data verification problems	145	160	50	27	3.51
Technical issues with online platform	158	140	54	30	3.48

Source: Field Survey: 2026

Decision Rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = Accepted

Analysis: All items recorded mean values above 2.50, indicating that delays, limited awareness, verification issues, and technical challenges are significant implementation problems confronting NELFUND.

Table 4: Research Question 2: How do institutional factors affect the implementation of NELFUND?

Institutional Factors	**Agree (%)**	**Disagree (%)**
Lack of trained administrative staff	72.3	27.7
Poor coordination with NELFUND officials	68.5	31.5
Inadequate ICT infrastructure	74.1	25.9

Source: Field Survey: 2026

Analysis: The findings reveal that institutional capacity constraints, especially inadequate ICT facilities and poor coordination, negatively affect NELFUND implementation.

Table 5: Research Question 3: What are the prospects of NELFUND in improving access to tertiary education?

Prospect Indicators	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Mean**
Improved access to higher education	170	150	3.61
Reduction in dropout rate	165	145	3.58
Financial relief for low-income students	178	142	3.66
Promotion of educational equity	160	148	3.55

Source: Field Survey: 2026

Analysis: Respondents strongly agreed that NELFUND has strong prospects in enhancing access, reducing dropout rates, and promoting equity in tertiary education.

4.4 Test of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H_0: There is no significant relationship between administrative efficiency and effective implementation of NELFUND.

H_1: There is a significant relationship between administrative efficiency and effective implementation of NELFUND.

Using Chi-Square (χ^2) analysis, the calculated value of χ^2 (18.64) was greater than the critical value (9.49) at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Interpretation: Administrative efficiency significantly influences the effective implementation of NELFUND in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Hypothesis Two

H_0: Technological challenges do not significantly affect students' access to NELFUND loans.

H_1: Technological challenges significantly affect students' access to NELFUND loans.

The regression analysis revealed a significant positive relationship ($p < 0.05$) between technological efficiency and student access to NELFUND loans. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the major findings of the study on the implementation challenges and prospects of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) in Nigerian tertiary institutions, in relation to the study objectives, research questions, and existing literature.

Implementation Challenges of NELFUND

The findings reveal that administrative delays, verification bottlenecks, and technical challenges significantly affect the effective implementation of

NELFUND in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Most respondents indicated that delays in loan approval and disbursement remain a major concern. This finding supports earlier observations that public sector programmes in Nigeria often experience implementation gaps due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and weak inter-agency coordination (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973).

In addition, the study found that poor awareness among students limits participation in the NELFUND scheme. Many respondents reported limited access to accurate information regarding eligibility criteria, application procedures, and repayment terms. This aligns with recent reports indicating that awareness of the NELFUND loan scheme varies significantly across regions and institutions, thereby affecting uptake (The Nation Online, 2025).

The study also revealed that institutional data verification challenges and inadequate ICT infrastructure hinder effective loan processing. These challenges were attributed to limited digital capacity and insufficient training of institutional staff. This finding corroborates recent reports that delays in NELFUND disbursement are partly caused by sluggish institutional response and poor data management systems (The Guardian Nigeria, 2025).

Institutional and Technological Factors

The analysis showed a significant relationship between administrative efficiency and the effective implementation of NELFUND. Institutions with better-trained personnel, improved ICT facilities, and clearer internal processes recorded fewer delays in loan processing. This finding supports the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which emphasizes that system efficiency and ease of use enhance adoption and performance (Davis, 1989). Technological challenges, including network instability and difficulties navigating the online application platform, were also found to affect students' access to the loan scheme. This finding is consistent with studies that identify digital infrastructure deficits as a key barrier to the success of e-governance initiatives in Nigeria (Way Teach, 2025).

Prospects of NELFUND in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Despite these challenges, the study found strong prospects for NELFUND in improving access to tertiary education. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the loan scheme has the potential to reduce dropout rates, support students from low-income backgrounds, and promote educational equity. This finding aligns with Public Value Theory, which emphasizes that public programmes should enhance social inclusion and citizen welfare (Moore, 1995).

Furthermore, the study revealed optimism regarding the long-term sustainability of NELFUND if implementation challenges are adequately addressed. Recent statistics indicating a steady increase in the number of beneficiaries suggest growing acceptance and relevance of the scheme among Nigerian students (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2025).

Implications of the Findings

The findings imply that while NELFUND is a promising policy intervention, its success largely depends on institutional readiness, technological efficiency, and effective stakeholder coordination. The rejection of the null hypotheses further confirms that administrative and technological factors significantly influence the implementation outcomes of NELFUND. This supports the argument that policy success is not only determined by design but also by the quality of implementation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Nigerian Education Loan Fund represents a pivotal policy intervention aimed at democratizing access to higher education financing in Nigeria. Early implementation has yielded significant quantitative results in terms of applications and disbursements. However, operational inefficiencies, institutional non-compliance, administrative bottlenecks, and sustainability concerns pose significant challenges that must be addressed to maximize the programme's potential. Strategic reforms emphasizing technological enhancement, stakeholder compliance, awareness campaigns, and diversified funding will be crucial in ensuring that NELFUND meets its mandate effectively and equitably.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the implementation challenges and strengthen the prospects of the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) in Nigerian tertiary institutions:

i. **Strengthening Administrative Capacity**: The management of NELFUND, in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Education, should strengthen administrative structures by recruiting and training competent personnel. Regular capacity-building programmes should be organized for institutional liaison officers to improve efficiency in data verification, documentation, and loan processing.

ii. **Improvement of ICT Infrastructure**: There is a need to upgrade and stabilize the digital platforms used for loan application, verification, and disbursement. NELFUND should invest in robust ICT systems with adequate server capacity to handle high traffic and reduce technical disruptions. Tertiary institutions should also improve internet connectivity and digital facilities to support seamless interaction with the loan system.

iii. **Enhanced Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns**: NELFUND should intensify nationwide sensitization programmes using multiple communication channels such as campus orientations, social media, radio, and institutional portals. This will improve students' understanding of eligibility requirements, application procedures, and repayment conditions, thereby increasing participation and reducing misinformation.

iv. **Improved Inter-Institutional Coordination**: Effective collaboration between NELFUND and tertiary institutions should be institutionalized through clear operational guidelines and timelines. Regular meetings and feedback mechanisms should be established to ensure timely submission of student data and quick resolution of administrative challenges.

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