Career Education as an Impetus for Poverty Reduction and the Role of Adult Education

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Abstract: *Career education and adult education are increasingly recognised as critical levers for addressing unemployment, inequality and poverty in Nigeria. Career education equips learners with vocational, entrepreneurial and digital skills that enhance employability and income-generation, while adult education provides inclusive and flexible platforms for lifelong learning. This paper explores the nexus between these two domains, situating career education within adult learning as a driver of poverty reduction and sustainable development. Drawing on human capital theory and Freirean critical pedagogy, it argues that adult learners gain not only technical competence but also empowerment to engage critically with socio-economic structures. Using a narrative review of recent literature (2015–2025), the paper synthesises evidence showing that well-designed career education reduces poverty by aligning training with local labour markets, integrating entrepreneurship and financial literacy, and targeting disadvantaged groups such as women and rural dwellers. It also highlights barriers including fragmented policies, inadequate funding, limited facilitator capacity, and socio-cultural constraints, which hinder effective implementation. To strengthen career education in adult education, the paper proposes innovative strategies such as embedding digital literacy, promoting entrepreneurial incubation, expanding community-based delivery, and adopting blended, employer-linked training models. The analysis concludes that integrating career education into adult learning frameworks offers a realistic, scalable pathway to poverty reduction in Nigeria, provided it is supported by coherent policies, sustained financing, and strong partnerships with stakeholders.*

Keywords: Career education, adult education, poverty reduction, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Career education and adult education are two interrelated concepts that play a vital role in shaping individual growth, employability, and societal development. Career education can be broadly understood as an organised set of activities designed to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to make informed career decisions and pursue sustainable livelihoods. It

encompasses career guidance, vocational training, and exposure to work-related opportunities that enhance one's capacity to participate productively in the labour market. Adult education, on the other hand, refers to structured learning activities specifically tailored for mature learners who, due to various socio-economic, cultural, or personal reasons, seek to continue or resume their education beyond traditional schooling years. It is often associated with lifelong learning, literacy development, vocational training, and civic education, serving as a means of empowerment and social inclusion (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

The philosophical foundation of career education within adult learning is rooted in human capital theory, which posits that education and skill acquisition are investments that increase individuals' economic value and productivity. From this perspective, adult learners who engage in career-oriented education can improve their employability and income-generating capacity, thereby breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy also provides a relevant framework, as it emphasises education as a tool for liberation, consciousness-raising, and empowerment. Career education aligns with this philosophy by enabling adults not only to acquire practical skills but also to critically engage with societal structures that affect their economic opportunities (Freire, 2018).Moreover, career education in adult learning contexts embodies the principle of lifelong learning, which the European Commission (2020) identifies as central to adaptability in modern societies. In a world marked by rapid technological change, evolving labour markets, and shifting economic priorities, adults are increasingly required to update their knowledge and skills. Career education, therefore, becomes not merely an avenue for immediate employment but a continuous process of personal and professional development that ensures resilience against poverty and unemployment. This lifelong approach also promotes holistic development, as it integrates personal fulfilment with economic advancement.

The link between career education and adult education can also be examined from the standpoint of social justice and equity. Adult learners often include disadvantaged populations such as women, rural dwellers, and low-income earners who were previously excluded from formal schooling. Providing career-oriented adult education opens pathways for these groups to access opportunities that were once beyond their reach. It reduces inequality by enabling participation in economic and social life, which is crucial for sustainable poverty reduction. Empirical evidence suggests that countries that invest in adult career education tend to have higher employment rates and lower poverty levels, further highlighting the significance of this relationship (UNESCO, 2019).In essence, the conceptual clarification of career education and adult education reveals that both are mutually reinforcing in the quest for individual empowerment and societal development. Career education provides the framework for skill development and career readiness, while adult education supplies the inclusive platform through which individuals can engage in such learning. Together, they establish a philosophical and practical foundation that addresses both personal aspirations and collective challenges of poverty alleviation and social transformation

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a narrative review methodology, which allowed for a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature on career education and adult education in relation to poverty reduction. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports, and policy documents were systematically identified through academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect. The search focused

on publications from 2015 to 2025 to ensure the inclusion of contemporary perspectives, although seminal works were also considered where necessary. Sources were critically examined to highlight conceptual clarifications, theoretical foundations, and practical linkages between career education, adult learning, and socio-economic empowerment. Unlike systematic reviews, the narrative review approach was chosen because it provided the flexibility to integrate diverse viewpoints, contextual insights, and philosophical arguments that underpin the subject matter. Through thematic organisation and critical analysis of the selected literature, the review generated a coherent understanding of how career education within adult learning frameworks contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable development.

The Nexus Between Career Education and Poverty Reduction
Career education encompassing skills acquisition, vocational training and systematic career guidance occupies a central place in strategies to reduce poverty in Nigeria because it directly addresses the mismatch between the competencies citizens possess and the demands of a changing labour market. Evidence from policy reviews and programme evaluations indicates that when career education is responsive to local economic realities it facilitates transitions into both paid employment and sustainable self-employment, thereby raising household incomes and buffering families from poverty shocks (World Bank, 2018). Vocational and technical education programmes that teach marketable trades such as carpentry, tailoring, electrical installation, agribusiness processing and digital skills provide learners with concrete, income-generating capabilities that formal academic routes do not always deliver. Studies conducted in Nigerian settings highlight how well-designed skills training linked to local value chains improves trainees' likelihood of starting micro-enterprises or gaining apprenticeships, and thereby contributes to poverty reduction at community level (Onweh et al., 2017). Beyond technical competence, entrepreneurship components and business management training embedded within career education are critical; access to basic financial literacy, business planning and market-linkage supports raises the survival rates of small enterprises created by graduates of skills programmes and improves their capacity to scale, which amplifies poverty-reducing effects over time (Manaf & Ibrahim, 2019). Career guidance often overlooked in low-resource contexts plays a catalytic role by helping adults and youth make informed choices about which skills to acquire given prevailing labour market signals. Where guidance services are available, beneficiaries are more likely to select trades with local demand, invest in complementary certifications and pursue viable livelihood pathways rather than undertaking training that does not translate into work (Ukoha, 2022).

Importantly, adult education frames career education as part of lifelong learning: adult learners, especially those who left school early or who were excluded from formal schooling, benefit from flexible, modular training that recognises prior learning and allows incremental skill accumulation without cutting off current income streams. This flexibility supports poor households to balance immediate survival needs with longer-term human capital investment, making skills programmes more inclusive and equitable in their poverty-reduction potential (World Bank, 2018). Empirical work within Nigeria also emphasises that the magnitude of poverty reduction produced by career education depends on programme quality, relevance and linkages; training that is supply-driven, short on practical exposure, or disconnected from employers and local markets tends to produce limited outcomes, whereas programmes that integrate apprenticeships, internships and employer partnerships show stronger employment and income gains (Damba, 2024).

Another consistent finding is the particular value of targeting women and marginalised groups: when career education includes gender-sensitive recruitment, women-centred training cohorts and targeted support such as childcare or seed grants, women trainees demonstrate higher rates of enterprise creation and household wellbeing, which multiplies the poverty-reduction impact across families and communities. Localised interventions that combine skills, finance access and market information therefore produce the most robust reductions in poverty indicators. At the policy level, aligning national TVET (technical and vocational education and training) frameworks with local economic development strategies and ensuring sustained funding, accreditation pathways and quality assurance are necessary complements if career education is to be a lasting engine of poverty reduction rather than a short-term palliative (Onweh et al., 2017; World Bank, 2018).

The nexus between career education and poverty reduction in Nigeria is real but conditional: career education becomes a powerful anti-poverty instrument when it is demand-driven, embedded within adult education modalities that allow incremental learning, linked to market and employer networks, and supported by enabling policies and gender-sensitive programming. Scaling such approaches with attention to quality, local context, and post-training support is the pathway by which skills acquisition and career guidance can meaningfully reduce poverty for millions of Nigerians.

Adult Education as a Vehicle for Economic Empowerment
Adult education in Nigeria functions as a crucial vehicle for economic empowerment by offering lifelong learning pathways that bridge the divide between formal schooling and the skills demanded by local labour markets. For many marginalised Nigerians, women, rural dwellers, out-of-school youths and older adults who missed formal educational opportunities adult education programmes provide targeted functional literacy, vocational training and entrepreneurial skills that directly enhance employability and income-generating capacity. Studies and programme reviews across Nigeria show that when adult learning is aligned with local economic opportunities it increases participants' ability to secure casual and small-scale formal employment, start micro-enterprises, and participate more effectively in value chains; these gains are particularly evident where training combines literacy with hands-on technical or business skills rather than offering literacy alone (Osaghae, 2019). Moreover, UNESCO's monitoring of adult learning and national reports highlights that lifelong learning frameworks which include community-based learning centres, modular short courses and competency-based certification raise adult learners' confidence and social inclusion, both of which are preconditions for economic participation and mobility (Košmerl et al., 2022). This is not only about individual skill acquisition: adult education also reshapes household economics by improving financial literacy, encouraging diversified livelihoods, and enabling access to cooperative or savings structures that provide capital for small enterprises.

The effectiveness of adult education for economic empowerment in Nigeria is moderated by policy coherence and sustainable funding. Evaluations of recent interventions indicate that programmes supported by consistent funding and strong linkages to local industry or microfinance produce better labour-market outcomes than short-term, poorly resourced initiatives (Ojobanikan, 2024). Where adult learning is embedded within a broader national skills agenda and coordinated with vocational education and training (VET) systems, graduates are more likely to receive recognised credentials that employers respect, thereby improving formal employability prospects (World Bank, 2022). At the community level, adult education that is demand-driven designed around the expressed needs of participants and the realities of local economies achieves higher rates of enterprise survival and income

growth. Nevertheless, persistent barriers remain: inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified facilitators, gendered constraints on women's participation, and social stigma attached to returning to learning can limit reach and impact. Recent Nigerian studies emphasise that scaling impact requires blended delivery modes (face-to-face plus digital or radio-based modules), context-sensitive curricula, and stronger monitoring of learning outcomes to ensure that programmes translate into measurable economic gains (Regina, 2024). Importantly, the pathway from learning to empowerment is rarely linear; complementary measures such as access to start-up capital, market information, mentorship and enabling regulatory environments are often necessary to convert new competencies into sustainable livelihoods.

In sum, adult education in Nigeria offers a pragmatic and equitable route to economic empowerment when it is conceived as lifelong, skills-oriented, and tightly linked to local labour markets and support systems. Evidence from national reviews and empirical studies across the last decade suggests that policies which prioritise funding stability, demand-led curriculum design, accredited competency frameworks and partnerships with private sector and microfinance actors produce the most consistent improvements in employability and household incomes (Košmerl et al., 2022; World Bank, 2022; Osaghae, 2019; Ojobanikan, 2024; Regina, 2024). To maximise impact, stakeholders should therefore treat adult learning not as an isolated social service but as an integral component of economic development strategies that combine education, finance and market access to reduce poverty and expand opportunities for Nigeria's marginalised populations.

Barriers to Effective Career Education in Adult Learning Contexts
Adult learners aiming to translate career education into real economic mobility frequently encounter a dense web of socio-economic obstacles that make participation and progression difficult. Time poverty is ubiquitous: adults balancing precarious work schedules, irregular hours and caregiving responsibilities often cannot attend classes or apprenticeships that follow conventional timetables, and even when short courses exist, the cumulative cost in lost wages is prohibitive (OECD, 2020). Direct costs such as course fees, materials, transport compound this problem, especially for low-income households who must prioritise immediate survival needs over longer-term investment in skills. Moreover, informational poverty such as limited awareness of relevant programmes, credentialing pathways or employers' expectations means many potential learners never discover career pathways that would suit them, or cannot navigate the administrative procedures required to enrol or access financial support (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

Institutional barriers further limit the reach and effectiveness of career education for adults. Many adult learning providers remain fragmented across sectors (formal education, vocational training centres, NGOs and employer-run schemes), producing inconsistent standards, opaque crediting and weak articulation between programmes and recognised qualifications (Cronen, Diffenderffer & Medway, 2023). Recognition of prior learning (RPL), a mechanism that could speed adults into appropriate training levels by valuing informal and workplace experience is often poorly implemented or unevenly available; administrative complexity, lack of assessor capacity and conservative institutional cultures make RPL unreliable as a bridge into higher qualifications (Salzmann et al., 2024). Digitalisation promises wider access but institutional readiness varies: many providers lack the resources, staff training or infrastructure to deliver high-quality online or blended career curricula, while quality assurance frameworks have not kept pace with new delivery modes, undermining employer confidence in such qualifications (OECD, 2020).

Cultural factors and social norms also play a powerful, if sometimes less visible, role in constraining adult engagement with career education. Gender roles and expectations can restrict women's mobility and availability for training; in many contexts, societal norms still prioritise unpaid domestic labour for women, making participation in out-of-hours training impractical without reliable childcare or supportive workplace policies. Ageism and stigma attached to returning to education deter older workers from re-skilling, who may fear being labelled as obsolete or worry that their life circumstances make learning pointless (Boeren & Rubenson, 2022). In addition, cultural mismatches between course content and learners' lived realities, for example, curricula that assume particular language fluency, educational backgrounds or career aspirations can alienate marginalised groups and reduce retention and success rates (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

Intersecting inequalities make these barriers mutually reinforcing: those with the lowest incomes are more likely to work in insecure jobs without employer training support, to have poorer prior schooling, and to live in areas with fewer quality providers. Employers themselves are an important part of the equation; where firms do not invest in workplace learning or where labour markets are saturated with low-paid, low-skill jobs, the immediate returns to career education may be muted, which in turn demotivates adults from enrolling (OECD, 2020). Policy fragmentation exacerbates the situation such as short electoral cycles, limited public funding for adult learning and a tendency to treat adult education as an add-on rather than an integral part of lifelong learning systems leads to underinvestment in outreach, learner support services and pathways that would convert training into sustainable employment outcomes (Cronen et al., 2023).

Addressing these barriers requires coordinated action: financial supports and flexible delivery modes to mitigate time and cost constraints; stronger RPL systems and clearer pathways to recognise workplace experience; employer engagement and incentives to expand work-based training; and culturally responsive curricula that acknowledge the diversity of adult learners' backgrounds (Salzmann et al., 2024; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). Without such integrated responses, career education will remain an untapped promise for many adults rather than a credible engine for poverty reduction. The literature is clear that participation gaps are not merely individual failings but system failures: overcoming them demands policy design that sees adult learners as whole people embedded in complex social and economic contexts (OECD, 2020; Boeren & Rubenson, 2022).

Empirical Evidence on Career Education and Poverty Reduction
Large-scale reviews and policy syntheses find that skills programmes often improve participants' likelihood of employment and, in some cases, raise earnings, though effects vary by programme design, beneficiary group and follow-up period; shorter courses and those without strong employer linkages tend to produce smaller or fleeting gains, whereas longer programmes that combine classroom training with on-the-job experience show more durable labour-market benefits (Poverty Action Lab, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Meta-analytic work on formal vocational education likewise reports positive but modest average impacts on employment probabilities with heterogeneous effects on wages signalling that vocational pathways can help absorb workers into productive activities but are not a uniform remedy for income poverty without complementary economic and labour-market measures (Au Yong Lyn et al., 2024).

Systematic reviews focused on youth in low- and middle-income countries have reached similar conclusions: evaluated training programmes frequently increase the probability of taking up non-farm

employment or self-employment, and can strengthen occupational transitions for young people, yet impacts differ by context and frequently attenuate over time unless reinforced by market access, business support or social protection measures (Maïga et al., 2020). In the Nigerian context, programme evaluations and case studies offer pragmatic illustrations of these general findings. National and subnational initiatives that combine technical training, entrepreneurship modules and placement support have documented improvements in participants' employability and small-business creation, although persistently high youth unemployment and structural labour-market constraints mean that many trainees still face underemployment or low earnings absent macroeconomic growth and private-sector absorption (World Bank YESSO baseline and follow-up materials, 2018–2024).

Country-level evidence also highlights critical implementation challenges in Nigeria including mismatches between curriculum and employer needs, inadequate instructional quality, and limited financing for scale which blunt the poverty-reduction potential of career education unless addressed by coherent policy and industry partnerships. Comparative evidence from systematic reviews and institutional evaluations points to several design features that raise the probability that career education will reduce poverty: alignment with local labour demand, inclusion of practical internships or apprenticeships, attention to soft skills and literacy, targeted supports for women and other marginalised groups, and linkages to microfinance or market access services to help graduates turn skills into sustainable livelihoods (Poverty Action Lab; World Bank; ILO, 2024). Taken together, the empirical record suggests that career education can be an important instrument for poverty reduction but is most effective as part of an integrated strategy that addresses demand-side constraints and provides complementary supports; in Nigeria and globally policymakers must therefore prioritise quality, employer engagement and rigorous monitoring to convert training outputs into lasting income gains for vulnerable populations.

Strategies for Strengthening Career Education in Adult Education for Sustainable Development
Career education that is deliberately scaffolded within adult education programmes offers one of the most promising pathways to sustainable poverty reduction in Nigeria, provided it is delivered through strategies that respond to local labour markets, digital transformation and community realities. To begin with, integrating digital literacy into adult learning curricula is essential: Nigeria's low baseline of digital skills and uneven access to digital infrastructure mean that adult learners must be offered staged, practice-oriented digital training that moves from basic device and mobile-money use through to online entrepreneurship and remote work competencies; such staged frameworks are already being recommended in national and international policy notes that stress a national digital literacy framework and targeted assessment in Nigeria.

 Equipping adults with these competencies not only improves employability but also enables participation in expanding gig and fintech ecosystems that have shown rapid growth in recent years, thereby creating multiple, low-entry pathways out of poverty. Second, embedding entrepreneurship and practical career skills into adult education must go beyond theory to include mentored micro-enterprise incubation, modular TVET (technical and vocational education and training) courses, and pathways to local markets. Evidence from Nigerian higher education and TVET contexts indicates that entrepreneurship education raises entrepreneurial intentions and can be a catalyst for venture creation when pedagogy is practical, locally contextualised and linked to industry actors; adult programmes can borrow these lessons by pairing short, competency-based modules with seed microgrants, mentorship and linkages to value chains.

Third, community-based approaches using community learning centres, libraries, faith-based organisations and local cooperatives make career education accessible and relevant for marginalised groups (women, rural dwellers, older learners). These community nodes reduce travel/time costs for learners, allow instruction to be delivered in local languages, and facilitate peer learning and cooperative enterprise models that spread risk and share profit, all of which strengthen the poverty-reduction potential of career education.

Fourth, digital platforms and blended delivery must be designed for low-bandwidth and mobile-first contexts. The World Bank and partner initiatives emphasise leveraging EdTech and modularised digital pathways while ensuring alignment with local employers so curricula remain demand-driven; adult career education should therefore adopt short competency badges, employer-validated microcredentials and stacked certification that cumulatively lead to recognised qualifications.
 Fifth, teacher/facilitator capacity is pivotal: adult educators require training in andragogy, digital facilitation and market-linked pedagogy so that they can coach, mentor and assess adults returning to learning. Investment in trainer development, simple teaching toolkits and monitoring frameworks will help scale quality across non-formal centres and TVET institutions, and research on adult learning highlights that sustainability depends more on ongoing facilitator support and local relevance than one-off training events.

Finally, financing and governance arrangements must combine public subsidy, private sector partnerships and community financing mechanisms to ensure programmes are affordable, accountable and scaled. Practical financing can include conditional small grants for start-ups, outcome-based payments linked to placement or revenue milestones, and local cooperative saving schemes that reduce initial capital barriers. An integrated strategy that combines digital literacy, practical entrepreneurship modules, community delivery hubs, employer engagement and sustained facilitator development underpinned by smart financing and locally relevant assessment will maximise the poverty-reduction impact of career education through adult learning in Nigeria. Such an approach aligns with national digital ambitions while remaining sensitive to regional inequalities and the lived realities of adult learners, thereby offering a realistic, scalable pathway towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

CONCLUSION

Career education integrated into adult education represents a critical driver for poverty reduction and sustainable development in Nigeria. The evidence demonstrates that when adults are equipped with practical skills, digital literacy, entrepreneurial competencies and market-relevant knowledge, their chances of securing employment and creating sustainable livelihoods significantly increase. Adult education offers a flexible and inclusive platform that empowers disadvantaged groups, particularly women, rural dwellers and those excluded from formal schooling, to engage meaningfully in economic activities.

Equally important is the recognition that effective implementation requires coherent policies, sustained funding, community-based delivery and strong partnerships with private sector actors. Barriers such as limited infrastructure, inadequate facilitators and socio-cultural constraints must be addressed through innovative strategies, including blended learning, recognition of prior learning and demand-driven curricula. If well-coordinated, career education within adult learning can transcend its role as a remedial intervention and become a sustainable engine of national development. Thus, prioritising

career education in adult education policy and practice is not only a pathway to individual prosperity but also a strategic response to Nigeria's pressing challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

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