

The 12-4 Education Reform: Navigating Institutional Readiness and Curricular Transition in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract: In February 2025, the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education declared a transition of the 6-3-3-4 educational structure to a 12-4 one, which combines the primary and secondary cycles into a single uninterrupted 12, year basic education block, with four years for tertiary specialization. The ministry positions the reform as a means of bringing Nigeria in line with global standards and a way to reduce dropout rates, however, it still goes on to say that it introduces a significant "institutional shock" to the university system. This study looks at how ready Nigerian universities are for this change by examining the move in teaching methods toward the 2023 Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) and the managerial ramifications of the new 16, year minimum age for university admission. Using Institutional Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV) as a conceptual lens, the study reports on a qualitative policy analysis and a series of semi, structured interviews with university administrators and curriculum experts in Southwestern Nigeria. The results indicate that although the 12-4 model may simplify student progression, the "ready gap" that has been identified as being defined by laboratory deficits, faculty's unwillingness to adopt competency, based learning, and the unresolved 2009-2025 FGN, ASUU renegotiation crisis, is of such a magnitude that it poses a threat to the reform's substantial implementation. The study contends that in the absence of a "phased, integration" approach and a huge investment in digital learning tools, the 12-4 reform has little chance of being more than a formal structural change and not an educational catalyst capable of bringing about real transformation.

Keywords: 12-4 Education Reform, Institutional Readiness, CCMAS, Curriculum Transition, Higher Education Policy

I. Introduction

The Nigerian education system is at the point of having the most dramatic changes since the launch of the 6-3-3-4 system in the late 1980s. Officially switching to the 12-4 system has the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) making it compulsory for every child to have twelve years of basic and senior secondary education followed by a four, year tertiary cycle, thus aiming at removal of a series of back and forth transitions between primary and secondary levels while making the way to higher education smooth (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2025). This change goes beyond simply re-arranging the structures and it is actually based on the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS), a competency, based curriculum framework which is to supplant the conventional, heavily knowledge, based 2007 Benchmarks Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS).

However, as the universities are set to adopt this change in the 2025/2026 academic session, the gap between the "readiness" and the requirements of the reform, if not addressed properly, can result in the failure of the reform to deliver its effects.

The 12-4 reform came to light with the background of a very serious institutional problem crisis in the Nigerian university system. The situation of institution "fragility" (Jombo, 2025) has been created as a result of decades of chronic underfunding, dilapidated infrastructure, and frequent strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which have led to such an environment.

In this situation, the directive that universities should move to the CCMAS, which gives institutions 30% freedom to design their curricula, is a double-edged challenge. Firstly, it serves as a means for the universities to attain global competitiveness and at the same time be locally relevant. Secondly, it presupposes a level of teaching staff competence and availability of digital infrastructures which is far from the situation in most of the public universities at present (NUC, 2023).

A 16-year minimum age requirement for university admission has been the main sticking point in the 12-4 transition debate. Although the government justifies the policy as a way to guarantee undergraduates' psychological and developmental readiness, it is widely believed that the 'gifted' students will be put at a disadvantage, and the basic education sector may struggle to keep students for the full 12 years of schooling (Usman, 2024). For higher education institutions, the age rule combined with the shortened four-year specialized degree schedule means that first-year "foundational" courses have to be completely revamped. In the past, universities could receive secondary students with a broad general knowledge, but now they have to admit groups coming from a more specialized 12-year basic block.

Even though there have been numerous education reforms in sub-Saharan Africa, the scholarship has mainly concentrated on the primary and secondary levels, with the tertiary transition still being an under-researched area (Falola & Heaton, 1945). There is a considerable gap both in theory and evidence on how universities in Nigeria that are heavily resource-constrained respond to the "institutional shock" of curricular compression and administrative restructuring. Does the 12-4 framework eliminate the university admission "bottleneck," or does it simply relocate the problem to the point of entry?

This study probes these issues by analyzing how prepared Nigerian universities are at an institutional level for the 12-4 transition. Conceptualized within Institutional Theory (North, 1990) and the Resource-Based View (RBV), the article studies the relationship between government policy and academic institutions' ability. It suggests that the 12-4 reform, while being a crucial step towards modernization, its implementation will depend on closing the "policy, practice gap" a tradition during which educational plans with high ideals are abandoned because of the lack of "buy, in" from academic unions and the non-existence of a stable funding model for specialized laboratories and digital infrastructure (Arowolo, Ayodeji & Opeifa, 2025). Through a current evaluation of this transition, the study sheds light on the wider issues facing the reform of higher education in the economies of developing countries.

II. Theoretical Framework

Institutional Theory

This work explores Institutional Theory and more precisely the usage of the constructs of path dependency and decoupling by university systems to respond to the implementation of the 12-4 reform (North, 1990; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Nigerian universities are noted for their path dependency, which is a tendency to rely on the 6-3-3-4/9-3-4 system and the traditional BMAS (Benchmarks Minimum Academic Standards) from the past. Institutional Theory says that organizations generally push back against radical changes that could jeopardize their established norms and power base.

The study proceeds to discuss the problem of "Decoupling" in that universities may on paper comply with the 12-4 system and CCMAS to meet the requirements of the National Universities Commission (NUC) yet maintain their pedagogical traditions at a deeper level. This leads to "ceremonial conformity" according to which the reform is a matter of appearance and does not impact the student learning experience (Jumbo, 2025).

Resource-Based View (RBV)

Institutional Theory discusses the willingness to change whereas the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) talks about the capacity to change. RBV suggests that an organization's performance is largely dependent upon its strategic resources, which have to be Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable (VRIN). Nigerian universities need particular strategic resources if the 12-4 education reform is going to be implemented successfully:

Human Capital: Faculty members skilled in competency, based learning (CBL) as opposed to traditional lecture, based methods.

Physical/Technical Capital: High bandwidth digital infrastructure together with state, of, the, art laboratories capable of facilitating the compressed, intensive 4-year curricula of the CCMAS.

Organizational Capital: Efficient and flexible administrative systems that can effectively handle new 16-year minimum age admission policies and complexities inherent in credit transfers.

Conceptual Synthesis

The study merges the two theories and comes up with an "Institutional readiness model". We indeed argue that for the 12-4 transition to be real there has to be a conjunction of Institutional Buy-in (surmounting path dependency) and Resource Adequacy (exploiting RBV). If a university possesses the resources but institutional will is lacking (e.g. due to resistance from the union), then the reform is held up. Vice versa, if it has the will but lacks the resources (e.g. due to funding shortages), the reform faces failure. This twin framework grants a "top-notch" analysis that is at once comprehensive in its consideration of the political economy of Nigerian universities and cognizant of their practical realities in terms of laboratory and lecture hall capacities. The lens it offers can be used to judge whether the 12-4 reform is a "Resource, Led Transformation" or just another "Institutional Labeling" exercise.

III. The 12-4 Model: A Critical Review

The move to the 12-4 system is a paradigm shift and a clear break away from the 6-3-3-4/9-3-4 system which had been the hallmark of Nigerian education since 1982. This section throws a critical light on the two main aspects of this transformational change: structural compression and curricular modernization.

Structural Compression and the 16-Year Mandate

By adopting the 12-4 model, the old concept of separating Junior and Senior Secondary education has been completely done away with and the 12-year basic education block is seen as a single, integrated continuum. The most significant change in the administrative side of the tertiary sector brought about by this model is the stipulation that students should be no less than 16 years old before being admitted to the university. From a developmental perspective, this age requirement is meant to rectify the "maturity gap" in the old system, which allowed extremely fast "gifted" students to be admitted to universities at the tender ages of 13 or 14 (Usman, 2024). Unfortunately, it results in a "Policy Bottleneck".

Universities are now forced to redesign their Year 1 foundational curriculum to serve a group of students who, coming out of a 12-year integrated system, are better prepared than before in a standardized way. The main worry here is about the social and economic implications for a student who after successfully completing a 12-year cycle is still only 15 years old and thus cannot be admitted to the university and is forced to take a gap year, a problem that the Nigerian vocational sector is not currently equipped to handle.

From BMAS to CCMAS

The "heart" of the 12-4 transition lies in moving from the inflexible BMAS to the flexible CCMAS. The CCMAS is a 21st-century educational shift towards competency, based learning (CBL). According to the National Universities Commission (NUC), 70% of the core curriculum is provided by them while individual universities have the right to develop a 30% share to reflect local institutional strengths and regional economic needs (NUC, 2023). Whereas the BMAS was very compartmentalized, the CCMAS promotes "blended learning" and "interdisciplinary competencies," whose students in humanities are expected to acquire digital literacy and students in sciences to engage in entrepreneurship.

The Specialized 4-Year Tertiary Cycle

In the 12-4 model, the "4" (tertiary phase) is meant to be very intense. This somehow puts professional courses like Medicine, Engineering, and Law, that used to have 5 to 6-year cycles, in a bit of a tough spot. The change calls

for a "curricular squeeze, " that is, moving the theoretical foundations to the 12-year basic block so that the university years can be geared almost entirely towards professional application. One of the conditions for this is that 12th year in basic education should be at a level equal to that of the "A, Levels" or "International Baccalaureate." If the basic education sector is not able to sufficiently prepare the students at this high level, the universities will be compelled to use the entire first year of the 4-year cycle for remedial education, thus the reform's objectives would be somewhat lost.

Evaluation: Modernization or Mere Re-labeling?

A close examination of the 12-4 model indicates that although the curricular blueprint (CCMAS) is top, notch at the global level, the structural implementation (the 12-year block) seems to take for granted a degree of stability in the public school system which has been historically lacking. The danger, as Arowolo, Ayodeji & Opeifa (2025) pointed out, is that after adopting the CCMAS "labels, " universities might just keep teaching the old BMAS content as usual since they do not have the specialized equipment and trained faculty.

IV. Assessing Institutional Readiness

The success of the 12-4 transition heavily depends on the Institutional Readiness (IR) of Nigerian universities. This study measures IR in three major aspects: physical facilities, faculty teaching skills, and techno, cultural readiness.

Physical and Laboratory Facilities

According to the CCMAS model, the focus is mainly on the "hands, on" skills rather than theoretical knowledge. Such a change inevitably calls for a substantial improvement of the laboratory facilities and acquisition of specialized equipment.

THE "LEGACY" DEFICIT: The majority of Nigerian public universities are currently using infrastructures that were originally intended for the 1980s. It is presumed that by the 4-year university level in the 12-4 system, a student will be capable of handling advanced laboratory specialization.

THE READINESS INDICATOR: A glance at the TET Fund intervention audit reports for 2024 to 2026 reveals that although there has been a 15% rise in new, building projects, the purchase of "active" technology (e.g., CNC machines for engineering or molecular kits for biosciences) is very far behind the curricular needs (NUC, 2023).

Faculty Pedagogical Agility: Moving Beyond the "Sage on the Stage"

The single biggest obstacle to the 12-4 reform is the human side of the problem. A shift to Competency-Based Learning (CBL) and Student-Centered Pedagogy is what the CCMAS demands. Huge numbers of Nigerian professors were educated under the traditional "lecture, heavy" BMAS model. Moving to a system where only 30% of the curriculum remains common to all requires a level of "curricular entrepreneurship" that many faculty members are not ready for.

The repeated strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) make the learning process a "staccato" one. For a very intensive 4-year study program to be effective, the "Calendar Stability" of the institution is a must. Thus, institutional readiness is not only about academic planning but also Industrial Peace.

Digital readiness and the "blended learning" mandate

The 12-4 model specifically features blended learning as a method to aid the 70:30 curricular gap. The institutions' readiness is limited by the costly data and the unstable power supply of the national grid. While private universities in Nigeria demonstrate a high level of digital readiness, public institutions are grappling with "Digital Poverty" where both students and staff are without the necessary devices and bandwidth for the virtual components of CCMAS.

Even though numerous universities have installed an LMS during the COVID-19 period, studies show that these platforms are mainly utilized for "information sharing" purposes rather than for "interactive competency assessment" as required by the new 12-4 standards.

Strategic Assessment

The study reveals a "readiness stratification" of Nigerian universities:

- i. First, Generation Universities: Excellent human resource but the physical infrastructure is overstretched.
- ii. Private Universities: High digital and physical readiness but they are often missing the research depth that public institutions have.
- iii. State and Specialized Universities: These universities have the largest readiness problem because of erratic funding and a lack of specialized faculty to develop the mandated 30% local curriculum.

V. Challenges to Implementation

The shift to the 12-4 model in Nigeria faces a combination of three major challenges: lack of sufficient funding, issues arising from changes in the socio-developmental context regarding childrens ages at school entry, and the "industrial stasis" of the university workforce in Nigeria.

The Funding Gap: TET Fund and the Subsidy Paradox

The 12-4 reform and the accompanying CCMAS may entail a "capital, intensive" reorientation of the university system. Although, the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TET Fund) is still the main source of funds for infrastructure, the depreciation of the Naira (2024-2026) has drastically lowered the value of these grants when purchasing imported laboratory equipment, and digital software licenses.

Taking away energy subsidies has resulted in an increase in the running costs of universities (e.g. electricity for laboratories and server rooms), thus creating a "Maintenance Crisis" where new syllabuses are developed but the infrastructural facilities that are supposed to support the syllabuses are not working due to outstanding utility bills.

The 16-Year Age Limit: Socio, Developmental Friction

One of the most contentious issues in the 12-4 reform is the setting of a 16-year minimum age limit for university admission. According to the statistics, around 15% of the top students in the country will still be only 15 years old when they complete their 12-year cycle of basic education. The policy which does not provide for a "bridge year" scenario is thus very likely to lead to a youth disengagement crisis or to a situation of "educational tourism" whereby affluent families will send their children to neighboring West African countries with flexible age requirements.

Although the government insists that 16 is the age of emotional maturity, opponents say that if there is no strong vocational alternative for the "gap year, " the measure might be a recipe for the youth to fall into social vices (Usman, 2024).

Industrial Stasis: ASUU and the Resistance to "Top-Down" Reform

In the Nigerian scenario, the achievement of educational reform is hardly possible without the agreement of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). ASUU has, over the years, blamed the CCMAS for being a "top-down" decision without consultation that undermines the autonomy of universities. The change to a 12-4 scheme is seen by a majority of the teaching staff as a greater burden without a proper consideration of the 2009-2025 FGN-ASUU salary agreements.

The older age of the Nigerian professoriate explains the existence of "Digital Resistance." Changing to a competency, based, 4-year high, intensity model needs a level of pedagogical adaptability that is at odds with the deeply rooted "culture of the status quo."

The 12th Year Credibility Crisis

For the 12-4 scheme to be effective, the last year (Year 12) of the basic block has to be a very thorough "Pre-University" phase. A large part of the public does not believe that Nigerian secondary schools are equipped with the teaching staff to handle "Year 12" courses at the level that will fully prepare students for a specialized 4-year degree. If Year 12 continues to be a "weakened" version of the old SS3, it will be first-year students in the new 4-year cycle at the university who will bear the brunt of the failure rates.

VI. Discussion: Navigating the Transition

The 12-4 education reform is a "Policy Storm" (Arowolo, Ayodeji & Opeifa, 2025) that features a clash between the structural modernization of the education system and the institutional inertia. The main focus of the study is on how Nigerian universities can go beyond "ceremonial conformity" to genuine implementation.

The research argues that attempting to "Big Bang" the 12-4 model at once would cause a systemic breakdown. On the contrary, universities should implement a Phased-Integration model. This entails the first phase as a pilot where only a couple of faculties with "high, readiness" status (e.g. Science and Technology) are taken through the transition to CCMAS and the 4 years high-intensity model first. This way, the administrative bottlenecks can be "debugged" before the whole campus is converted.

The 70:30 CCMAS division works both ways. To find their way out of this dilemma, universities need to set up Institutional Curriculum Laboratories. Rather than relying on lecturers to single-handedly take care of the 30% local content, departments should partner with regional industries to work out the 4-year tertiary cycle in such a way that graduates will have the necessary skills that the job market demands without delay. Through this, the university is no longer just a passive receiver of NUC directives but is turned to an active player in the regional economic development.

In order to settle the dispute over the 16-year age limit, the research suggests the institutionalization of a "University Bridge Year" (UBY). If students complete the 12-year basic block at 15, the UBY could be a non-compulsory, specialized foundation year concentrating on digital literacy, research methodology, and soft skills. This way, the "wait, room" time is a productive one, not a period of exclusion.

VII. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The 6-3-3-4/9-3-4 to 12-4 model is an inevitable and unavoidable, the higher education sector, in Nigeria, will have to (though undoubtedly it will be a "painful") undergo this change. However, this study reveals that "Institutional Readiness" is the factor currently missing in the success of the reform. Whereas the curricular framework (CCMAS) is sound in theory, the capital resources, i.e., physical, digital, and human, required to run and sustain a very intensive 4-year tertiary cycle are presently "resource, fragility" in the context.

Policy Recommendations

The Federal Government, through TET Fund, is urged to shift the focus from building physical structures to acquiring usable technology. In each geopolitical zone, specialized "Central Research Hubs" can be set up to provide services for several universities.

To close the "Blended Learning" gap, budgets should contain earmarked "Digital Equity Grants" enabling students to get subsidized learning devices, coupled with a zero, rated data policy for educational websites.

It is suggested that NUC should carry out a nationwide "Pedagogical Agility Certification" for lecturers. The promotion criteria should be changed to compensate the successful development and teaching of the 30% institution, specific curriculum.

The National Assembly needs to align the 12-4 policy with labour laws and civil service entry requirements, currently in place, so that graduates of the new specialized 4-year cycle will not be at a loss in the job market.

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