



*Students' Preference for ... Alfred, S. O. & Aminu, M. (2025)*

## **Students' Preference for Admission into Federal Colleges of Education (Technical) in Nigeria: Voluntary Choice or Systemic Coercion?**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the degree to which student admission into Nigeria's Federal Colleges of Education (Technical) is informed by personal preference or imposed by systemic, familial, and policy constraints. Using a mixed-methods design, data were gathered from 470 students across ten federal technical colleges situated in Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, alongside qualitative interviews with staff and student groups. Descriptive statistics, logistic regression, thematic coding, and chi-square analyses were conducted to uncover patterns of voluntary versus coerced enrollment. Findings revealed that only 25.53% of students selected their institution and program based on personal interest, while a majority were directed by policy placement (53.19%) or family pressure (21.28%). The study introduces the concept of Systemic Admission Coercion (SAC), capturing the interplay of socioeconomic hardship, regulatory frameworks, and cultural norms that stifle student agency. Policy recommendations include reforms to the JAMB Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS), enhanced career counselling, and national rebranding of technical teacher education. This research provides a policy-relevant framework for addressing structural injustice embedded in Nigeria's education access mechanisms.*

**Keywords:** Student preference, systemic coercion, technical education, tertiary admission, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

In modern education systems, student autonomy in choosing a preferred academic institution or course of study is a cornerstone of motivation, academic engagement, and eventual career fulfillment. Yet in many developing countries—including Nigeria—this autonomy is routinely distorted by structural constraints beyond the control of the student. Despite rising enrollment figures and expanded access to higher education, few students genuinely exercise self-directed decision-making in the schooling process. Technical colleges in Nigeria, especially the Federal Colleges of Education (Technical), are intended to play a vital role in producing technically competent teachers for secondary and vocational education. These institutions are strategically situated across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones and designed to reinforce national goals related to technological transformation, skills acquisition, and teacher supply in STEM-related subjects. However, anecdotal and administrative evidence consistently indicates that these colleges are not first-choice institutions for most students. Observations suggest that students are often “redirected” to these institutions through a combination of policy-imposed placement, failure to meet university requirements, socioeconomic pressures, and family mandates. These insights demand a deeper investigation into what drives student enrollment in Nigeria's Colleges of Education (Technical): Are these students choosing their paths, or are they victims of a coercive educational structure?

The broader implication lies not just in understanding individual stories of displacement, but in assessing the capacity of these colleges to fulfill their mandates when the majority of enrollees arrived with no intrinsic motivation. Fault lines are clearly visible across gender, class, and regional divisions. Northern students, for instance, often face cultural constraints, while students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have limited options other than accepting local, less



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prestigious offers. By exploring these dynamics empirically, this paper engages with a growing body of work that calls for deconstructing the illusion of “choice” in African education systems. It focuses on answering the core questions: To what degree is student choice autonomous? What are the dominant predictors of coerced admission? And how can Nigeria’s technical education institutions fulfill their mandate when the majority of students are socialized into disengagement?

## Literature Review

### Student Choice and Structural Constraints

Globally, scholars have long examined student choice as a culturally and economically mediated decision process. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) argue that even in developed contexts, choice is rarely free—a student’s socioeconomic background, informational access, and familial expectations filter their options long before application deadlines. Ball et al. (1996) and Reay (2004) extend this argument, highlighting how class-based inequalities translate into misaligned opportunity structures, particularly visible in college and program selection. In Nigeria, access to higher education is determined not only by academic ability or exam performance but by a combination of regulatory entitlements (e.g., catchment area, quota systems), economic realities, and cultural lineage. Oni (2024) finds that more than 60% of students accepted into non-university institutions viewed the placement as temporary or undesired. As Adamu and Yusuf (2021) explain, the JAMB-controlled Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS) frequently redirects students into institutions with open slots, many of which include Colleges of Education (Technical).

### Cultural Pressures and Parental Influence

Family dynamics, especially parental influence, play a profound role in shaping students’ educational paths in Nigeria. In households where education is both an economic investment and status symbol, parents often predetermine choices based on job security, religious acceptability, or community expectations (Adebayo & Alabi, 2021; Chukwuemeka & Igbokwe, 2022). For female students in conservative regions of Northern Nigeria, cultural norms may restrict higher education options and impose locally acceptable career choices, irrespective of personal interest (Ibrahim & Usman, 2020).

### Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Compelled Acceptance

Olajide and Olagunju (2019) show that many students from low-income households accept admission into nearby technical institutions due to unaffordability of university location, tuition, and transportation. This reality aligns with studies by Callender (2018) and Obi and Yusuf (2024) who assert that affordability, rather than aspiration, is the dominant determinant of educational choice in low-income communities. In effect, institutional proximity becomes a proxy for “choice,” particularly where little or no financial aid opportunities exist.

### Technical Education: Status, Perception, and Mismatch

Despite its critical role in national development, technical education in Nigeria continues to suffer from perception problems. It is frequently dismissed as a fallback option for students who could not meet university entrance thresholds. Waziri and Dabo (2025) describe this as the “academic recycling tier,” where motivation and preparation are often suboptimal. In their study, Eze and Nwankwo (2022) found that students placed in technical education programmes without initial interest reported lower satisfaction and higher dropout tendencies. This stigma undermines national policy goals, including the use of Colleges of Education (Technical) to stem youth unemployment and promote self-reliance through entrepreneurship. The alignment is compromised when the pathway into these institutions is itself the result of misalignment or social compulsion.



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## **Theoretical Framework**

To conceptualize and analyze the study's findings, two theoretical lenses are employed: Social Reproduction Theory (Bourdieu) and Human Capital Theory, with a new model 'Systemic Admission Coercion' (SAC) developed from the study's empirical base.

### **Social Reproduction Theory**

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of Social Reproduction posits that education systems often maintain, rather than disrupt, class hierarchy and privilege by embedding dominant group norms into formal schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this view, institutional structures reward those already socialized into the "habitus" of academia and devalue those whose social backgrounds do not align. Technical education institutions draw disproportionately from under-resourced regions and schools, reinforcing their function as residual pathways. In the Nigerian case, this dynamic is visible in how students from poorer backgrounds and remote regions are overrepresented in institutions that are undervalued socially and economically. The very process of being redirected by CAPS or coerced by family into these institutions is a manifestation of institutionalized inequality masquerading as educational fairness.

### **Human Capital Theory**

Human Capital Theory articulates education as a strategic investment whose outputs are measurable in skills, productivity, and economic growth (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961). However, in Nigeria's context of structural inequality, the theory's application becomes ambiguous. Students, particularly those from lower-income homes, are often forced to accept marginal returns on their educational investment—selecting less rewarding or misaligned education paths due to affordability and access factors (Ibrahim & Usman, 2020; Ukaigwe, 2021). This mismatch undermines both the promise of education as human capital and its utility in eradicating poverty. Enrolling in a programme by coercion minimizes student engagement and increases the likelihood of negative academic outcomes.

### **Systemic Admission Coercion (SAC)**

To integrate the empirical reality observed in this study, the concept of Systemic Admission Coercion (SAC) is introduced. SAC refers to a multidimensional phenomenon where centralized policy systems (e.g., UTME placements), socio-economic hardship, and sociocultural expectations constrain students' ability to choose an academic path that aligns with their interest, aptitude, or life goals. Distinct from overt coercion, SAC operates subtly and systemically, compelling students to accept suboptimal education outcomes that their social position preordains. This model reflects both macro-level policy decisions and micro-level family decisions that remove volition—even when choice mechanisms (such as application portals or counselling services) are said to exist. SAC thus becomes a powerful diagnostic lens to reevaluate access, equity, and engagement in Nigeria's technical teacher education system.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to understand the extent and nature of systemic coercion in students' admissions into Colleges of Education (Technical) in Nigeria. A mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate, as it enables the validation and expansion of quantitative trends through in-depth contextual exploration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative data provided generalizable patterns, while qualitative inputs from focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) enriched the findings through narrative evidence.



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### **Population and Sampling**

The population for this study comprised students admitted between 2020 and 2025 into Federal Colleges of Education (Technical) across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. These institutions were deliberately chosen because they are federally regulated, centrally admitted through JAMB/UTME, and offer similar technical education programmes under the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) mandate. A total of ten Federal Colleges of Education (Technical) in Nigeria were selected as research sites. These institutions reflect diverse regional locations and admission practices, thereby increasing the representativeness of the findings. Using stratified random sampling, a total of 470 students were selected from first- and second-year cohorts across these colleges. Stratification was based on institution, gender, admission mode, and department, ensuring a diversified sample suitable for statistical analysis. Additionally, 20 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 10 in-depth interviews (IDIs) involving faculty heads and admission officers were conducted across the institutions.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

**Quantitative Instrument;** A structured questionnaire was used, divided into five major sections: Section A: Demographic Information; Section B: Personal Interest and Motivation; Section C: Parental/Guardian Influence; Section D: Socioeconomic Constraints and Section E: Policy-Directed Placement Experiences. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (5)*. The questionnaire was pilot-tested, and internal consistency reliability measured using Cronbach's Alpha yielded  $\alpha = 0.87$ , indicating a high level of reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

### **Qualitative Instruments**

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) explored students' admission decision journeys, perceptions of technical education, and reflections on systemic barriers. FGD participants were grouped by gender and year of study to capture intersecting perspectives. Interview guides for staff focused on institutional policies, student motivation, and observed patterns of student engagement over time.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 25. Techniques included: Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, frequencies); Chi-square tests to assess relationships between variables (e.g., gender vs. admission type); Independent sample *t*-tests to explore group differences; Logistic regression analysis to identify predictors of voluntary vs. coerced admission and Cross-tabulations to reveal demographic variations. Qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis technique. Codes were collated into themes and examined for alignment with the quantitative findings, allowing for deep triangulation between modalities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal College of Education (Technical), Gusau. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were upheld. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were allowed to skip questions or withdraw at any time.

### **Presentation of Results**

#### **Student Admission Type Distribution**

Table 1 summarizes the mode of admission into technical colleges as reported by the 470 respondents.



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Admission Type	Frequency	Percentage
Voluntary (self-chosen)	120	25.53%
Parental Influence	100	21.28%
Policy/Quota Placement	250	53.19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>470</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source: Field Survey (2025).**

The data show that the majority of students (approximately three-quarters or 74.47%) did not choose their colleges voluntarily. Instead, they were either allocated through policy or directed by parents or guardians. Only one in four students exercised agency in the admission process.

### Mean Ratings of Admission Influence Factors

Students rated the extent to which different factors influenced their admission decision.

Factor	Mean Score (Max = 5.00)
Policy Placement	4.35
Parental/Guardian Pressure	4.10
Socioeconomic Constraints	4.00
Perceived Employability	3.60
Personal Interest/Motivation	3.45

**Source: Field Survey (2025).**

External factors—policy, parents, and poverty—emerged as dominant influences over intrinsic factors like personal interest or employability awareness.

### Logistic Regression Analysis

To predict factors influencing the probability of voluntary admission, logistic regression was performed.

Predictor	$\beta$	p-value	Exp( $\beta$ )	Interpretation
Personal Interest	1.82	<0.01	6.18	Strong positive influence
Parental Influence	-1.12	0.03	0.33	Significant negative influence
Socioeconomic Constraints	-0.87	0.04	0.42	Significant negative influence
Policy Placement	-0.35	0.47	ns	Not significant individually
Perceived Employability	0.54	0.13	ns	Not statistically significant

**Source: Field Survey (2025).**

The strongest predictor for voluntary choice was personal interest, which increased the odds six times more than other variables. However, parental pressure and financial hardship were significant negative predictors, reducing the likelihood of free choice by 67% and 58%, respectively.

### Cross-Tabulations and Chi-Square Tests

Chi-square analyses found significant associations at  $p < 0.05$ : Region vs. Admission Type: Students from northern colleges more likely to be coerced than southern counterparts; Gender vs. Admission Type: Female students less likely to have made voluntary choices; Family Economic Background vs. Admission Type: Students from low-income families were overrepresented in policy-driven and parentally influenced admissions

### Thematic Findings from FGDs and IDIs

#### Theme 1: Parental and Cultural Direction

*"My father insisted I should learn metalwork because it's good for handwork and I'll get a job teaching quickly. I wanted to study Business Administration." – Female, FCE (T) Gusau*



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### **Theme 2: Financial Constraints as a Limiting Agent**

*"I applied to university, but we couldn't afford the fees. My parents chose the college of education close to home." – Male, FCE (T) Gombe*

### **Theme 3: Policy-Induced Rerouting**

*"I didn't pick this college. I got a text from JAMB that I had a space here. I didn't know what technical education was before coming." – Female, FCE (T) Omoku*

Students expressed feelings of surprise, resignation, or indifference at being reallocated by JAMB, having missed cutoff marks for more preferred programmes.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

1. Autonomous choice is the minority experience: Only 25.53% independently selected their programme.
2. Systemic forces dominate student paths: Policy placement and socioeconomic factors significantly outweigh personal interest in shaping admissions.
3. Parental authority plays a coercive role, especially in rural contexts and female education.
4. CAPS and JAMB's redistribution mechanisms, while aimed at equity, inadvertently reroute students away from interest-aligned destinations.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study reveals a clear disconnect between student aspirations and their realized educational pathways, demonstrating that a significant portion of students in Nigeria's Colleges of Education (Technical) do not enroll out of personal choice. Instead, structural constraints—including policy-driven placement, financial hardship, and familial influence—function as coercive mechanisms that restrict student autonomy. These findings directly validate concerns raised in the literature about the illusion of choice in Nigerian higher education (Ajayi & Ayodele, 2023; Obi & Yusuf, 2024).

The conjunction of quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives indicates that the majority of students are subject to a process best described as systemic admission coercion. Despite appearing to have multiple institutional options through the JAMB Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), in reality, students—particularly from poor or rural backgrounds—navigate a closed loop of affordability, access limits, and parental control, which ultimately predetermines their college placements.

#### **The Illusion of Choice in a Constrained System**

Analysis of logistic regression indicates that personal interest as a predictor of voluntary admission is statistically powerful, increasing the odds of choosing one's college by over six times ( $\text{Exp}\beta = 6.18$ ). However, this choice is often overridden by parental instruction or systemic allocation. Over half of the respondents (53.19%) were allocated to their institutions through JAMB's reallocation protocols such as CAPS—an automated system ostensibly created for fairness, yet one that potentially undermines student aspirations. This finding resonates with Bourdieu's theory of *social reproduction*, which argues that education systems tend to preserve social stratification by channeling less-privileged groups into lower-status institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the Nigerian context, Federal Colleges of Education (Technical), though important to national manpower development in STEM education, are devalued due to negative perceptions, low entry thresholds, and misunderstood career pathways—turning them into destinations of last resort, rather than authentic platforms for skill empowerment.

#### **Parental Coercion and Familial Expectations**



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Findings also show that more than one in five students (21.28%) reported parentally driven programme decisions. In some communities, students—especially daughters—are discouraged from attending universities far from home or are directed into “non-prestigious, but safe” careers like teaching (Chukwuemeka & Igbokwe, 2022). Such pressures, though sometimes well-intentioned, deprive students of identity exploration and self-efficacy, critical factors for academic persistence and meaningful career formation (Bosah, 2020; Adebayo & Alabi, 2021). Qualitative data support this claim. Several female participants described how their fathers or uncles submitted application forms on their behalf, choosing local technical colleges for cost or religious reasons. Here, the role of family shifts from that of support system to coercive agent. The overlap between economic paternalism (sponsorship) and cultural patriarchy (decision-making) places students—particularly female and low-income youths—at even greater disadvantage.

**Economic Hardship as Structural Barrier**

Socioeconomic constraints featured prominently in both the regression and thematic analyses. Roughly 40% of students shared that they would have pursued university education or professional programmes like engineering or medicine, if not for cost. Instead, they settled for local technical colleges, which were more affordable and often allowed them to live at home. This finding reflects the outcomes of studies by Ibrahim and Usman (2020) and Olajide and Olagunju (2019), which show that university attendance in Nigeria is increasingly shaped by wealth levels rather than academic ability. From a Human Capital Theory lens, this means that less-privileged students are denied the opportunity to make optimal investments in their future earnings—a process that confirms Schultz's (1961) argument that educational returns favor those with the resources to freely choose high-value inputs.

**Gendered and Regional Dimensions of Coercion**

Chi-square testing and qualitative accounts suggest that female students and those from northern institutions were more likely to report external influences and lack of choice. This is not merely a cultural observation but signals deep systemic bias rooted in regionally uneven resources and gender-based access challenges (UNESCO, 2022; CLEEN Foundation, 2021). Girls, in particular, are often forced to accept programs in safe or proximate institutions, further reducing their national mobility and vocational competitiveness. This intersectionality aligns with global research on gender, class, and educational (dis)empowerment, particularly in contexts where policy distracts from lived inequality (Reay, 2004). Without deliberate inclusion policies and funding strategies, such disparities will likely persist, further entrenching inequality in technical education enrolment and outcomes.

**Towards a Theory of Systemic Admission Coercion (SAC)**

In synthesizing these findings, this paper proposes Systemic Admission Coercion (SAC) as a useful conceptual framework for interpreting coerced enrollment into non-preferred institutions in developing country contexts. SAC occurs not through brute force, but through (i) Structural placement systems like CAPS (ii) Socioeconomic limitations (iii) Cultural norms that prioritize family control over student preference (iv) Misaligned career information and poor counselling.

As a model, SAC helps to describe hidden coercion in formal equality. It stresses the ways in which “access to education” can still be stratified by income, region, and social capital—even under computerized, merit-based admission policies. This complicates dominant narratives that link rising enrollment with rising choice and satisfaction. It also calls for a more nuanced design of admission strategies that balance merit, equity, and motivation.

**Conclusion**



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This study examined the underlying factors influencing student admission into Federal Colleges of Education (Technical) and found that a substantial portion of respondents enrolled as a result of coercive, rather than voluntary, conditions. Only one in four students chose their institution based on genuine interest. The others were pushed by family, filtered by financial hardship, or passively reallocated through policy structures. The implications of such coercion are immense. When students do not begin their higher education journey with interest or informed understanding, the likelihood of disengagement, underperformance, and attrition increases. Technical education, which is already under pressure to feed Nigeria's innovation and workforce pipelines, suffers reputational damage as a result. It becomes a "landing space" for redirected students rather than a deliberate career destination. This study, therefore, calls for a multi-tiered intervention: one that retools admission policies, strengthens institutional guidance services, reinvests in public information about technical education, and—most importantly—restores agency to the student. Only such systemic change can prevent coercion from becoming normalized as the entry point into technical education.

### **Policy and Practice Recommendations**

In light of the findings and the emergent theory of Systemic Admission Coercion (SAC), the following policy and practice recommendations are proposed to restore autonomy in student educational pathways and enhance the status of technical teacher education in Nigeria.

#### **Reform JAMB Policy and CAPS Automation**

The current implementation of the Central Admissions Processing System (CAPS) by JAMB, while ostensibly equitable, compromises student choice through algorithmic reallocation. To ensure that students maintain autonomy over their academic futures:

- i. The process should integrate a mandatory student verification stage before final placement into alternative institutions.
- ii. Reallocations should be preceded by counselling prompts and career advisory messages through the JAMB portal.
- iii. Applicants must have a viable opt-out or deferment mechanism if reallocation does not match their preferences, rather than having to accept by default.

Such reforms would create a more student-centered admissions system.

#### **Institutional Empowerment and Orientation Programs**

Colleges of Education (Technical) must intervene at the institutional level to reduce student detachment and attrition resulting from coerced placements. Recommended actions include:

- i. Onboarding and induction programmes focused on career awareness, pedagogy in STEM, and graduate success stories.
- ii. The use of counselling units to identify and support students who express dissatisfaction upon admission.
- iii. Setting up student mentorship networks to foster vocational identity among first-year students.

#### **Improve Access to Career Counselling in Secondary Schools**

The roots of coercive admission often begin in senior secondary school, where inadequate guidance counsellors and a lack of access to career information lead to uninformed choices.

- i. Federal and state governments should mandate career counselling integration into school curriculum from SS1.
- ii. Teachers, alumni from technical colleges, and workplace mentors should conduct career visibility seminars in secondary schools annually.



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- iii. Parents and guardians must be included in these orientation programs to ensure joint decision-making supports the student's interest.

### **Tackling the Economic Roots of Coercion**

Scholarship and financial aid policies should be redesigned for inclusiveness:

- i. Introduce needs-based scholarships specific to students choosing technical education paths.
- ii. Provide mobility stipends to low-income students who receive placement far from home but wish to pursue programmes that match their interest.
- iii. Colleges should form partnerships with industry to create internship opportunities that allow students to gain early work experience while studying, reducing dropout risks linked to financial stress.

### **Rebranding Technical Education**

Finally, the negative perception of technical education must be tactically addressed:

- i. Launch a National TVET Campaign, showcasing the role of technical educators in digital skills, green economy jobs, STEM entrepreneurship, and innovation.
- ii. Upgrade facilities and learning environments in technical colleges to inspire confidence, improve performance, and represent 21st-century learning experiences.
- iii. Institutional leaders should be empowered to advocate for more visibility of technical colleges in educational planning and national skill development frameworks.

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