

Bridging the Legal Knowledge Gap: How AI Can Support Underrepresented Law Students and Researchers in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In the evolving landscape of legal education and research, access to timely, accurate, and affordable legal information remains a critical challenge, particularly, for underrepresented law students and early-career researchers in Nigeria. These individuals often face systemic barriers such as limited access to academic resources, underfunded institutions, and a lack of mentorship or technological tools to compete on a level playing field. This paper explores how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be a transformative tool in bridging the legal knowledge gap in Nigeria by democratizing access to information, enhancing legal research capabilities, and fostering inclusive academic growth. Drawing on doctrinal and socio-legal methodologies, the paper investigates the role of AI-powered platforms, such as legal research assistants, predictive analytics, and machine learning algorithms in equipping students and researchers from underserved backgrounds with tools to better navigate complex legal texts, improve writing and analytical skills, and conduct efficient case law research. It also examines the ethical implications of relying on AI, the potential for reinforcing existing biases if not properly designed, and the need for culturally sensitive and context-specific AI models. More importantly, the paper argues that AI is not a substitute for human reasoning or institutional support, but a complementary aid that can reduce the barriers of inequality in legal education. By highlighting real-life experiences, emerging AI projects in legal academia, and expert opinions, the paper provides a human-centered framework for adopting AI technologies in Nigerian law faculties and legal research centers. The study concludes by proposing practical recommendations for policymakers, legal educators, and tech developers to collaborate in making AI tools accessible, affordable, and ethical—ultimately empowering a new generation of informed, innovative, and inclusive legal thinkers in Nigeria. This study contributes to the growing discourse on legal tech and education equity in developing countries.

Keywords: Legal education, Artificial intelligence (AI), Legal ethics, Legal knowledge, Legal research, Technological tools

Introduction

Currently, legal education in Nigeria stands at a critical crossroads, that which will determine whether the country cultivates a truly equitable and competitive generation of legal professionals or entrenches systemic disparities that undermine justice itself. While the proliferation of law faculties across Nigerian universities suggests progress, the reality is far more troubling. A deep divide persists in the quality of legal training, disproportionately affecting students from marginalized backgrounds (1). Those enrolled in underfunded public institutions, particularly in rural regions, face severe limitations in accessing essential resources: outdated libraries, scarce digital legal databases, and minimal academic support. In contrast, their counterparts in elite urban universities enjoy well-stocked libraries, subscription-based research platforms, and robust mentorship networks (1). This imbalance creates what can be termed a “legal knowledge gap”, a chasm between those who have the tools to excel in the profession and those left struggling with obsolete materials and inadequate guidance. Similarly, the unequal distribution of access to legal materials, mentorship, and research tools which undermines both educational equity and the future of Nigeria’s legal scholarship (2).

The consequences of this gap extend beyond individual hardship; they threaten the very foundation of Nigeria’s legal system. When only a privileged few have access to comprehensive legal research tools, mentorship from seasoned practitioners, and exposure to contemporary legal debates, the resulting imbalance distorts the pool of future judges, policymakers, and advocates (2). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, no matter how brilliant, are often forced to rely on outdated textbooks and fragmented online

resources, leaving them ill-prepared for modern legal challenges such as cyber law, international arbitration, and human rights litigation. This disparity not only perpetuates socioeconomic inequality within the profession but also weakens Nigeria's capacity to produce globally competitive legal minds (3).

Moreover, the lack of uniform standards across law faculties worsens this challenge. While some institutions integrate clinical legal education, moot court competitions, and internships into their curricula, others lack the funding to provide even basic courtroom simulation training. This inconsistency means that many law graduates enter the Nigerian Law School, and eventually the legal market, with vastly different levels of preparedness (4). The current system risks producing a two-tiered profession: one group equipped to navigate complex, evolving legal landscapes, and another group left behind, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage (4).

While systemic disparities in Nigeria's legal education system have long persisted, the rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents an unprecedented opportunity to dismantle these barriers and democratize access to legal knowledge. Across the globe, AI is already revolutionizing legal practice and academia, streamlining research, automating document drafting, and offering personalized learning support. In technologically advanced jurisdictions, AI-powered platforms like Westlaw Edge and Lexis+ AI harness natural language processing to analyze case law in seconds, while virtual legal assistants provide real-time guidance to students and practitioners (5). Yet, in Nigeria, where the "legal knowledge gap" leaves countless aspiring lawyers at a disadvantage, the transformative potential of AI remains largely untapped. This study seeks to bridge that gap, critically examining how AI can empower underrepresented law students and early-career researchers while proposing actionable strategies for inclusive adoption (5).

Discussion - The Legal Knowledge Gap in Nigeria

The legal knowledge gap plaguing Nigeria's educational system is not merely an academic concern, it represents a fundamental failure to provide equal opportunities for the nation's future lawyers, judges, and policymakers. This disparity is entrenched in the socioeconomic and institutional structures that govern legal education across the country. Students enrolled in public law faculties, who constitute the majority of Nigeria's aspiring legal professionals, face systemic deprivation of the most basic academic resources (4,6). The situation is particularly dire when it comes to digital resources: subscription-based platforms like Westlaw, JSTOR, or even Nigeria's own LegalPedia remain out of reach for most, locked behind paywalls that underfunded institutions cannot breach (6).

Ndukwe's finding that over 60% of public university law students struggle to access essential legal materials paints only part of the picture (7). The geographic dimensions of this inequality create what can only be described as an educational apartheid. Law faculties in rural areas, particularly in Northern Nigeria, operate in near-complete isolation from the digital revolution transforming legal research globally. Their libraries, where they exist at all, are museums of legal antiquity, with collections frozen in time. Internet connectivity, when available, is often too erratic and expensive to support meaningful research (8). This stands in stark contrast to urban institutions, especially those in Southern Nigeria, where though still under-resourced by global standards, students at least have intermittent access to online materials and physical libraries with marginally better collections (8).

The crisis extends beyond books and bandwidth. Makulilo's research reveals a mentorship desert in many Nigerian law faculties, where the ratio of lecturers to students sometimes reaches an absurd 1:100. In such environments, even the most dedicated professors find it impossible to provide individual guidance (9). The consequences are devastating: brilliant minds from modest backgrounds, who have beaten incredible odds to enter law school, find themselves stranded without academic shepherding. Research projects stall, potential innovations die unborn, and promising legal thinkers abandon scholarly pursuits, not for lack of ability, but for want of guidance (9). This mentorship famine directly correlates with Nigeria's anemic contribution to cutting-edge legal discourse. While Ng'ambi argues that the jurisprudence of artificial intelligence and climate migration, many Nigerian scholars, especially those from marginalized institutions, remain confined to recycling well-trodden analyses of colonial-era statutes, not by choice but by circumstance (10).

The downstream effects of this systemic neglect are already visible in Nigeria's legal ecosystem. Courts grapple with poorly researched arguments, law reform initiatives lack empirical grounding, and Nigeria's voice in international legal forums grows increasingly faint. Perhaps most tragically, the creativity and perspective that students from disadvantaged backgrounds could bring to solving Nigeria's unique legal challenges from pastoral conflicts to cybercrime legislation, are being squandered (11). When only

the privileged few have access to proper legal training, the profession becomes an echo chamber of elite perspectives, blind to the realities of most Nigerians.

Addressing these inequities transcends educational policy, as it is a constitutional imperative. Section 18 of Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) focuses on education. This provision mandates equal educational opportunities, as it directs the government to ensure equal and adequate opportunities at all levels (12). Additionally, it mandates government action to promote science and technology, eradicate illiteracy, and provide free education at various levels, including free primary, secondary, tertiary education, and adult literacy programs, while the transformative ethos of Chapter II demands proactive state intervention to level these playing fields (12). More pragmatically, in an era where legal systems worldwide are racing to adapt to technological and societal upheavals, Nigeria cannot afford to have half its potential legal talent left behind. The solutions, while complex, must include emergency funding for public law libraries, negotiated nationwide access to legal databases, decentralized mentorship networks leveraging technology, and perhaps most critically, a national reckoning with the geographic and class biases built into Nigeria's legal education architecture (13). The alternative, a legal profession divided into haves and have-nots by the accident of alma mater, is a threat not just to the bar, but to the very rule of law itself (14).

Contributing Factors to the Legal Knowledge Gap in Nigeria

The barriers to equitable legal education in Nigeria form a complex web of systemic failures that perpetuate injustice within the very system meant to uphold it. These contributing factors create a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion that begins before students even enroll into the law school and continues to haunt their professional trajectories (14). These factors are discussed as follows:

Socioeconomic Barriers: The Digital Divide as Class Divide

The assumption that legal education occurs primarily in lecture halls has been shattered by the digital revolution, yet this revelation has only widened Nigeria's justice gap. Students from low-income families face a triple financial burden: the prohibitive cost of personal computing devices (a basic laptop consumes 6 months' minimum wage), extortionate data prices (Nigeria has some of Africa's most expensive mobile data), and the hidden costs of accessing physical resources (transport to better-equipped libraries often exceeds daily meal budgets) (14). This creates a cruel paradox where the students most in need of legal education as a vehicle for social mobility are precisely those priced out of its modern requirements. The result is a two-track system; while affluent students conduct research on AI-powered platforms, their less privileged peers rely on photocopied materials that may predate the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) (15).

Geographic Disparities: The Postcode Lottery of Legal Training

Akinyemi reveals how geography determines the destiny of the Nigerian legal education. Urban institutions are observed to benefit from proximity to: corporate law firms that donate resources, relatively stable electricity grids, and commercial hubs with better internet infrastructure among others (16). Meanwhile, rural institutions, operate in near-total isolation. For instance, the University of Maiduguri's law faculty, contends with both insurgency-related disruptions and acute resource deprivation (16). This geographic apartheid creates startling disparities: where an urban student might access 300,000 legal documents via a paid database, their rural counterpart may have never used an online law report (17).

Infrastructural Deficits: When Darkness Obstructs Justice

The physical environment of many Nigerian law faculties actively impedes learning:

Energy Poverty: Lecture halls and libraries experience daily power outages, making sustained research impossible. Many institutions rely on generators they cannot afford to fuel (17).

Digital Deserts: Computer libraries, where they exist, often contain obsolete machines unable to run basic legal software. The University of Benin's 2019 audit showed 87% of faculty computers were over 8 years old (16,17).

Space Crunch: Overcrowded classrooms (sometimes 200 students in spaces designed for 80) transform legal education into a spectator sport rather than an interactive process (18).

The Mentorship Crisis: Abandoned at the Starting Line

Nigeria's lecturer-to-student ratio (officially 1:45, but reaching 1:100 in practice) makes meaningful supervision mathematically impossible. The mentorship deficit is compounded by an unconscious bias where overworked lecturers instinctively prioritize students who: attend elite secondary schools, demonstrate existing legal vocabulary, and can afford research materials (18). This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where advantage begets advantage.

The Role of AI in Legal Education

Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents a groundbreaking shift in legal education, particularly for students from underserved and marginalized communities. Defined by the OECD (2021) as machine systems capable of performing tasks that traditionally require human intelligence such as reasoning, problem-solving, and language comprehension (19). AI is reshaping how legal knowledge is accessed, processed, and applied. By automating complex cognitive functions, AI tools are democratizing legal education, bridging gaps in resources, and empowering students who might otherwise face systemic barriers (19).

In the legal field, AI applications have evolved far beyond basic automation. Advanced algorithms now assist with legal research, case summarization, predictive analytics, and even drafting legal documents. In the United States and the United Kingdom, platforms like Lexis+ AI, ROSS Intelligence, and CaseText leverage natural language processing (NLP) help law students and practitioners to swiftly navigate vast case law databases, identify relevant precedents, and generate concise case summaries (20). These tools not only enhance efficiency but also reduce the steep learning curve traditionally associated with legal research. Similarly, in Nigeria, LawPavilion has emerged as a leader in AI-driven legal technology, offering features such as AI-powered case recommendations, citation analysis, and intelligent search functions. Such innovations are particularly valuable in regions where legal resources are scarce, law libraries are underfunded, and access to up-to-date legal materials is limited (20).

For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether due to economic constraints, geographic isolation, or institutional underfunding, AI can serve as an equalizing force in several key ways:

Reduce Dependency on Physical Libraries and Expensive Texts

Traditional legal education often requires access to costly textbooks, subscription-based journals, and well-stocked law libraries resources that many students in developing countries or underprivileged institutions lack (21). AI-powered research tools provide instant access to digitized case law, statutes, and legal commentaries, eliminating financial and logistical barriers. A student in a rural Nigerian law school, for example, can now conduct comprehensive legal research without needing physical copies of law reports or expensive online subscriptions (21).

Provide Self-Paced, Personalized Learning Support

Many law students in underserved regions struggle with limited faculty availability, large class sizes, or a lack of academic mentorship. AI-driven tutoring systems and legal research assistants can supplement traditional teaching by offering real-time feedback, interactive exercises, and customized study aids. For instance, an AI tool might analyze a student's legal memo, suggest improvements in argument structure, or recommend relevant cases the student may have missed (22). This self-paced support is invaluable for those who cannot rely on regular supervision.

Enhance Accessibility for Non-Native English Speakers

Legal English with its dense terminology and complex syntax poses a significant hurdle for students in countries where English is a second language. AI-powered language processing tools, such as grammar checkers tailored for legal writing or translation aids for comparative law studies, can help non-native speakers better comprehend and articulate legal concepts. This fosters greater inclusivity, ensuring that linguistic barriers do not exclude talented students from excelling in their legal education (22).

Challenges to AI Adoption in Nigeria's Legal Academia

Despite the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in legal education, Nigeria faces significant hurdles in its adoption. These challenges span technological, economic, institutional, and ethical dimensions, each compounding the barriers to effective AI integration. Below is an examination of these obstacles (23).

Technological barriers

Unreliable Power Supply and Internet Connectivity

Nigeria's inconsistent electricity infrastructure remains a critical bottleneck. Frequent power outages disrupt digital learning, making it difficult to rely on AI-powered platforms that require continuous online access. According to Mahomed (24) only about 50% of Nigerians have stable internet access, with rural areas suffering even lower connectivity rates (24). This digital divide excludes many law students from accessing cloud-based AI tools like LexisNexis AI or Westlaw Edge, which are essential for modern legal research (25).

High Cost of Digital Devices

The affordability of laptops, tablets, and smartphones necessary for AI-driven education poses another challenge. Many Nigerian law students rely on shared or outdated devices, limiting their ability to engage with AI applications. Even when institutions provide computer libraries, maintenance and upgrades are often neglected due to funding constraints (26).

Economic Constraints

Costs of AI Legal Tools

Subscription-based AI legal research platforms (e.g., LawPavilion Prime) are expensive, with annual licenses often exceeding the budgets of Nigerian law faculties. Public universities, which train the majority of the country's lawyers, operate on minimal funding, forcing them to prioritize basic resources over advanced technological investments (26).

Lack of Government and Private Sector Investment

Unlike countries such as China and the U.S., where AI in education receives substantial funding, Nigeria lacks coordinated investment in LegalTech. Without grants or public-private partnerships, law schools struggle to procure AI tools or train faculty in their use (27).

Institutional and Pedagogical Challenges

Resistance to Digital Transformation

Many Nigerian law faculties remain entrenched in traditional lecture-based teaching, with little emphasis on digital literacy (27). As Adeniran note, most lecturers still rely on printed casebooks and manual research methods, viewing AI as an unnecessary disruption rather than an enhancement (28).

Outdated Curriculum

The Nigerian legal education curriculum, largely unchanged for decades, does not incorporate LegalTech, AI ethics, or digital lawyering skills. Without mandatory courses on AI's role in legal practice, graduates enter the profession unprepared for tech-driven legal environments, putting them at a disadvantage in an increasingly digital global market (29).

Faculty and Student Digital Illiteracy

Many lecturers lack training in AI applications, making it difficult to integrate tools like ChatGPT for legal drafting or predictive analytics for case outcomes. Similarly, students unfamiliar with digital research methods may struggle to transition from physical law libraries to AI-enhanced databases (29).

Ethical and Regulatory Concerns

Bias in AI Legal Tools

AI systems trained on Western legal datasets may not account for Nigeria's unique jurisprudence, leading to biased or irrelevant case recommendations. For example, an AI model trained on U.S. contract law might misinterpret Nigerian customary law principles, producing flawed legal analyses (30).

Academic Misuse and Plagiarism

The rise of generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) has led to concerns about overreliance on automated legal writing, potentially stifling critical thinking and original research. Without proper guidelines, students may submit AI-generated work as their own, undermining academic integrity (30).

Lack of Regulatory Frameworks

Nigeria has yet to establish clear policies on AI use in education, leaving questions about, data privacy, accountability, and quality control (30).

Pathways for Inclusive AI Integration

To effectively leverage artificial intelligence (AI) in closing Nigeria's legal education and practice gaps, a coordinated, inclusive, and context-sensitive strategy is imperative. This requires collaboration among policymakers, academic institutions, private-sector innovators, and civil society to ensure that AI adoption is accessible, practical, and ethically sound (31). The necessary steps are as follows:

1. Policy Development

If Nigeria wishes to use AI's potential for legal education, the country must act. The NUC and Nigerian Law School should agree and document a clear national decision on the use of AI in legal education and training. Funding for the tools needed to use LegalTech at scale is also necessary, along with better internet bandwidth to support students. Pilot programs should happen before a national roll out of AI legal solutions. Successes from the South African legal education-AI partnerships or Indian digital literacy partnerships should help Nigeria develop a national framework to meet global standards for higher education while satisfying national challenges. Ultimately, public-private partnerships will be vital to convince investors to subsidize costs and deal with the equity issues of different resources existing at each institution (31).

Institutional Reforms

The law schools in Nigeria should be reformed so that they prepare students for a future that involves AI. There is also a need for a modernized curriculum that comprises core course content on LegalTech applications, AI-assisted research, and the ethical considerations of algorithmic decision-making. We should look at developing practice-based programs, including workshops for faculty to learn new skills, as well as experiential learning programs for students in the form of a digital clinic focused on AI tools for case analysis and legal drafting. A phased plan could be to develop pilot programs, at key institutions such as the University of Lagos, where the outcomes could be assessed and inform a more developed planned implementation and funding strategy to roll out across the entirety of Nigeria's law schools (32).

Innovation and Collaboration

Meaningful AI integration needs the collaboration of academia and innovators in LegalTech. Nigerian companies such as LawPavilion or Legalnaija should work with universities in developing solutions that are appropriate for the context involving: low-bandwidth modes of delivery as needed in areas like Nigeria where connectivity is unreliable and multilingual interfaces to widen accessibility. The cost model also needs to change to make the tools available to stakeholders within public institutions, which may mean something like tier-specified pricing or the involvement of government for subsidization. International organizations as well as NGOs could also contribute by providing grants to fund the foundation of AI legal labs or promote free and open-source alternatives, and generally producing an outcome that is free or the potential for no one institutional entity to be at a disadvantage due to a lack of finances in their quest of AI legal solutions (33).

Ethical and Academic Integrity Safeguards

As AI becomes part of legal educational programmes, strong ethical frameworks must be created. Guidelines should be clearly articulated about the appropriate use of AI in academic work to differentiate what constitutes legitimate assistance with research from reliance upon an artificial solution (34). Higher education institutions should establish their own plagiarism policies and gain access to plagiarism detection tools calibrated to legal texts, whilst considering the Nigeria Data Protection Act (35). At a minimum, institutions should mandate audits of their AI tools to ascertain and adjust for evidence of bias associated with the use of foreign databases, and especially when considering the factual and legal context relevant to Nigeria. Acting on these initiatives will support the integrity of academic study whilst embracing the benefits of AI (36).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The subject of this study has brought attention to the deep, structural biases in Nigeria's legal education, especially for underrepresented students and for early-career researchers. These biases acknowledge boundaries of socioeconomic disadvantage, marginalization, distance and isolation, poor infrastructure, and lack of innovation and progress in preparing students for the learning goals of the twenty-first century. This situation has left a huge legal knowledge gap in normalizing access, educating fairly, and even developing legal research and scholarship in Nigeria. The problems are systemic but they can be solved. AI does not provide a quick fix in Nigeria, but it has the power to be a driver of change by transforming access to legal resources, creating self-learning activity, and compensating for institutional failings in regard to mentorship and research infrastructure. Through the use of AI powered legal research tools, students in rural, non-established faculties can rise above the challenges of having to rely on physical law libraries in libraries, outdated legal resources, and limited supervision. However, as the paper has shown, advances in use of AI in Nigeria's legal educational system are surrounded by technological, economic, ethical, and regulatory barriers.

In order to properly utilize AI in closing Nigeria's legal knowledge gap, the Nigerian government instructing through the NUC and Law School must come up with a national AI strategy for legal education that includes lines for grants or funds for dedicated LegalTech tools, increased quality of internet infrastructure on campuses, and create pilot programs at selected universities in Nigeria to test scalable AI solutions. There are opportunities for partnerships with telecoms or technology providers to provide reliable and affordable connectivity, first for the rural institutions. Law faculties must begin urgently looking to update its curriculum to include AI literacy, LegalTech application, and ethical considerations. Law faculties must introduce courses that discuss AI-assisted legal research, digital lawyering, and algorithmic bias. We must also ensure that there are also faculty professional development programs to prepare lecturers to teach emerging technologies. We must partner with LegalTech companies (LawPavilion, Legalnaija, African Legal Tech Network) to create bilingual Open-source AI tools that are context specific. We must ensure that government and corporate sponsorships can support the implementation of facilities like AI Legal Labs or Clinics, where students can learn new ways to engage with emerging technologies and practice.

We also work with universities alongside Nigerian LegalTech companies like LawPavilion to incorporate context-specific tools into these facilities, including options for offline-capable working environments to accommodate spaces with poor connection or connectivity and multilingual support (Hausa, Yoruba etc.) or translations. Also ensure subsidized pricing models or opensource alternatives can be offered to the most disadvantaged under-resourced institutions. Scholarships, access programs, and mentoring network opportunities should also be designed for female students, those with disabilities, and students from conflict-affected or economically disadvantaged communities. All AI tools should also have inclusive accessibility features, such as speech-to-text, translation, and simplified interfaces. These recommendations provide Nigeria an opportunity to move in a new direction that not

only addresses the closure of the legal knowledge gap but also allows for the legal education process to rethink itself as a more inclusive, innovative, and future-proof process. In this evolving process, AI will not replace the teacher, the coach, or the mentor, but will enhance them, lower their barriers, and make ride along to be sure that no legal mind or potential is lost due to poverty, geography, or inequitable access to the institution.

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