IDENTIFYING THE UTILITY GAP: A QUALITATIVE CURRICULUM AUDIT OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES COMMISSION CORE CURRICULUM AND MINIMUM ACADEMIC STANDARDS (CCMAS) AND THE SELF-EMPLOYMENT READINESS OF EDUCATION ECONOMICS GRADUATES

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Abstract
This study examined the disjunction between curriculum reform and graduate employability in Nigeria through a qualitative audit of the National Universities Commission's (NUC) Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) for Education Economics, introduced in 2022 to replace the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS). Although the CCMAS was designed to align university education with 21st-century market realities, its functional impact on self-employment readiness remains underexplored. Drawing on documentary analysis and the CareerEDGE employability framework, this study conceptualizes a "utility gap," the functional disparity between curricular intent and graduates' economic agency. Analysis revealed a pattern of "theoretical saturation," in which abstract economic models overshadow practical tools such as data analytics software. This condition is compounded by "technological decoupling," as institutional infrastructures consistently lag stated digital aspirations, and by a "future-blind" neglect of green economy competencies. The study concludes that the transition from BMAS to CCMAS is largely semantic rather than functional. Without the deliberate cultivation of entrepreneurial agency, curriculum reform risks becoming a symbolic academic exercise rather than a viable economic intervention. The study recommends the integration of discipline-specific entrepreneurship education, mandatory technical skills training, and industry-linked incubation systems to bridge the gap between academic certification and economic action.

Keywords: *NUC CCMAS, Education Economics, entrepreneurial agency, utility gap, self-employment readiness, green skills, technological decoupling, theoretical saturation*

Introduction

Graduate unemployment in Nigeria reflects a persistent structural tension between academic training and labour market demands. Despite a substantial increase in graduate output over the past two decades, formal economic absorption rates have

remained stagnant, a pattern that has intensified calls for curriculum reform in disciplines that straddle the boundaries between education and economic practice. Education Economics, as one such dual-domain discipline, has been positioned as an important site of intervention in Nigeria's broader struggle to align tertiary education with national development imperatives.

The 2022 transition from the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) to the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS), framed by the National Universities Commission (NUC) as a "radical re-engineering" of Nigerian university education, represents the most significant curricular restructuring in recent memory. Through a 70/30 curriculum architecture, whereby 70% of content is nationally standardized and 30% is reserved for institutional customization. The CCMAS purports to embed critical thinking, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship across all disciplines. For Education Economics graduates, who are theoretically positioned for roles in consultancy, policy analysis, and educational management, these reforms carry particular significance.

Nevertheless, a "utility gap" persists: a functional failure of graduates to translate theoretical knowledge into viable economic activity. While existing scholarship frequently attributes this deficit to systemic factors such as funding constraints and infrastructural inadequacy, limited attention has been paid to the curriculum's own "utility value", its intrinsic capacity to produce graduates capable of self-directed economic action. This study addresses that gap by shifting the analytical focus from policy rhetoric to the curriculum itself, interrogating the CCMAS as an economic instrument intended to produce self-reliant actors capable of thriving in a volatile and rapidly evolving labour market.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's education system confronts a deepening paradox: the nation records increasing graduate output alongside persistently rising unemployment (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024). Education Economics graduates occupy a particularly vulnerable position within this dynamic, as they frequently lack the applied competencies; such as data-driven analysis or private enterprise management necessary for economic agency in the gig economy or for initiating independent ventures.

Although the CCMAS was explicitly designed to address this deficit, initial evidence suggests that a utility gap persists between the formal curricular intent and functional graduate capability. As Ogunode and Ayeni (2023) observed, documentation does not equate to skill acquisition when pedagogical practice remains predominantly theory driven. This theory–practice mismatch (Adebayo, 2021) leaves graduates without the applied competencies required for economic participation, compounded by the frequent inability of universities to operationalize the CCMAS's 30% institutional content provision due to infrastructural constraints.

Without rigorous evaluation, the CCMAS risks reproducing the very dependency it seeks to dismantle, one in which graduates are academically qualified yet economically constrained. This study therefore identifies the structural and pedagogical barriers that limit the curriculum's effectiveness as an instrument of economic transformation.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to evaluate the alignment between the CCMAS for Education Economics and the entrepreneurial competencies required for graduate self-employment readiness. The specific objectives are to:

I. Assess the integration of market-relevant and self-employment skills within CCMAS modules;
II. Determine the extent to which the CCMAS prepares graduates technically and psychologically for Nigeria's evolving labour market;
III. Investigate the structural and pedagogical factors, including infrastructure, staffing, and instructional methods that inhibit the translation of theoretical knowledge into practical utility; and
IV. Develop actionable, context-sensitive strategies to bridge the gap between academic certification and economic agency.

Research Questions

This study is structured around the following research questions:

1. To what extent do CCMAS modules integrate the practical skills required for graduate economic participation?
2. How effectively does the CCMAS prepare Education Economics graduates for self-employment in Nigeria's evolving market?
3. What structural and pedagogical factors hinder the translation of theoretical knowledge into practical utility?
4. What context sensitive strategies can bridge the utility gap for Education Economics graduates?

Significance of the Study

This study makes several contributions at multiple levels of the educational system. For policymakers, it provides empirical insights to ensure that curriculum innovations translate into measurable functional outcomes rather than symbolic compliance. For university administrators and faculty, it underscores the imperative for practical pedagogy and the cultivation of what Ogunode and Josiah (2023) term "entrepreneurial academics." For graduates themselves, it identifies concrete skill deficiencies in emerging domains, including data analytics and educational consultancy, and articulates pathways for remediation.

More broadly, by foregrounding the concept of the "utility gap," this research

repositions curriculum reform as a lever for national development, framing higher education not merely as a credential-granting institution, but as an incubator of economically active and self-reliant citizens. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing international debates on the alignment of tertiary education with sustainable development and labour market transformation.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study focuses on the functional alignment between the CCMAS framework for Education Economics and Nigeria's contemporary labour market environment, with particular emphasis on entrepreneurial competencies and self-employment readiness. The analysis draws on documentary evidence from the CCMAS (NUC, 2022), specifically targeting modules on entrepreneurship (ENT 211 and ENT 312), applied economics, and vocational skills. Consistent with Onyeike and Anyamele's (2023) recommendation, the study prioritizes the "intended curriculum" as captured in official policy documentation, rather than student perceptions or observed classroom practice. Contextually, the study examines the Nigerian economy from 2023 onwards, a period marked by intensifying youth unemployment and an accelerating transition toward gig-based and informal economic arrangements.

Operational Definition of Terms

National Universities Commission (NUC): The federal regulatory body responsible for supervising and accrediting university education in Nigeria.

CCMAS: The 2022 NUC regulatory framework replacing the BMAS. It employs a 70/30 sharing formula (70% national core; 30% institutional content) to align Nigerian degree programmes with 21st-century global standards.

Education Economics: An interdisciplinary programme applying economic models and principles to educational systems. As operationalized in this study, it refers to a degree programme intended to produce graduates capable of managing educational resources and initiating educational ventures.

Entrepreneurial Agency: Drawing on Bandura's (2001) Social Cognitive Theory, this term refers to the intentionality, self-efficacy, and capacity for agentic action required for a graduate to initiate and sustain self-employment within a volatile economic environment.

Utility Gap: The functional disparity between the "intended curriculum" as formalized in the CCMAS and the "market requirements" of Nigeria's contemporary labour market. It represents the chasm between academic certification and economically productive agency.

Self-Employment Readiness: The state of being technically and psychologically prepared to establish and manage an independent enterprise. Operationalized through

the CareerEDGE model, it measures the degree to which degree knowledge aligns with the adaptive mindset required for economic participation in the gig economy.

Green Skills: The technical competencies, values, and knowledge required to support a transition to a low-carbon economy (World Bank, 2025). This study employs the term to identify a "future-readiness gap" in areas such as sustainable school management and green education financing.

Technological Decoupling: A structural disconnect between curricular policy aspirations (e.g., mandated AI literacy) and institutional reality (e.g., absence of functioning computer laboratories), rendering a curriculum technologically modern only in name.

Theoretical Saturation: A condition in which curricula are disproportionately weighted toward abstract classical models at the expense of practical, market-oriented tools such as STATA, Python, or PowerBI.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

A functionally viable curriculum framework must move beyond descriptive alignment to critically interrogate the relationship between institutional intent and practical outcome (Onyeike & Anyamele, 2023). This study theorizes a three-stage logic: the CCMAS as input, the curriculum audit as process, and self-employment readiness as the desired output. The effectiveness of this progression depends upon the curriculum's integration of technical, agentic, and market-relevant competencies. Where these are absent, a utility gap emerges structural disjunction between curricular promise and economic functionality. This gap reflects the broader challenge of the theory–practice mismatch that has characterized Nigerian higher education for decades. Earlier frameworks such as the BMAS articulated what students should know but failed to operationalize how that knowledge should be applied (Okebukola, 2023), resulting in what Uwaifo (2021) describes as dysfunctional alignment: classroom pedagogy that remains insulated from industry realities. Graduates may demonstrate proficiency in economic theory while lacking the applied capacity for consultancy, digital services, or private educational enterprise.

The skills–expectation gap identified by Adebayo (2022) further illuminates the misalignment between curricular outputs and the demands of Nigeria's informal and gig sectors, which require hybrid competencies, digital literacy, financial management, and entrepreneurial adaptability that the CCMAS frequently treats as peripheral. As Onyeike and Anyamele (2023) argue, a curriculum that produces graduates dependent on shrinking formal employment opportunities reveals a significant utility deficit. Without "entrepreneurial academics" capable of bridging theory and practice, lecture-based instruction reproduces this deficit regardless of structural reforms (Ogunode &

Josiah, 2023).

The CCMAS (2022) attempts to address these structural limitations through its 70/30 architecture and the inclusion of entrepreneurship modules (ENT 211/312). However, conceptual tensions persist: the curriculum provides knowledge capital while failing to cultivate agency capital, the capacity for risk-oriented economic action. This "intent–action gap" leaves graduates theoretically equipped but strategically underprepared for discipline-specific niches such as EdTech consultancy or data-driven educational research.

Empirical Review

Scholarship on Nigerian curriculum reform consistently identifies a disjunction between curricular design and economic functionality. Adebayo and Ogunleye (2023) document "theoretical saturation" in Education Economics programmes, where abstract models displace practical competency tools such as STATA or Python. While their analysis focused on the BMAS, the present study investigates the extent to which the CCMAS has successfully addressed this structural weakness.

Ogunode et al. (2023, 2024) identified an implementation gap driven by infrastructural deficits; however, their analysis prioritised systemic constraints over the curriculum's intrinsic fit-for-purpose value for self-employment preparation. Koseda et al. (2026) applied the CareerEDGE model to assess graduate employability under the CCMAS, but their framework was generalized rather than discipline-specific. The present study refines and extends that application to the unique context of Education Economics pathways.

Additional empirical contributions include Agaba's (2025) analysis of a certification–competency paradox, in which technically underprepared graduates hold formal academic credentials, and the World Bank's (2025) documentation of emerging green economy competencies that are largely absent from Nigerian curricula. Crucially, a 2025 report from Olabisi Onabanjo University identified an "intent–action gap" among final-year students, who express interest in self-employment but lack the institutional support structures to act on that interest. These findings collectively reveal three interrelated deficits in the CCMAS: technical, sustainability-oriented, and agentic.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates four complementary theoretical perspectives to explain the relationship between educational provision and economic action. Human Capital Theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964) frames education as an investment in productive capacity, suggesting that persistent graduate unemployment reflects deficiencies in the quality and relevance of human capital formation rather than merely in labour market conditions. Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 1936; Vygotsky, 1978) holds that

meaningful learning must be experiential and contextually grounded, directly challenging the adequacy of rote-based curricula in developing adaptive, real-world competencies. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) provides an explanatory mechanism for the intent–action gap, demonstrating how perceived behavioural control and self-efficacy mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial intention and action. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to understanding why graduates who express aspirations for self-employment frequently fail to act on those aspirations. Entrepreneurial Agency Theory (Bandura, 2001) serves as the primary analytical lens of this study, emphasizing the capacity to translate knowledge into purposive economic action through opportunity recognition, risk-taking, and sustained self-regulation.

Taken together, these frameworks converge on a central insight: a curriculum achieves true utility only when it moves beyond knowledge transmission to cultivate the agentic capacity required for economic participation. This theoretical integration provides a robust and multidimensional analytical lens for evaluating the CCMAS not only as an educational framework but as a potential instrument of national economic transformation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using documentary analysis as its primary methodological approach. As Bowen (2009) established, documentary analysis is a rigorous and systematic method for examining and interpreting documents to elicit meaning and develop understanding, and it is particularly well-suited to evaluating policy frameworks such as curriculum documents. The design is appropriate to the study's objective of interrogating the CCMAS as a formal policy artefact rather than assessing its implementation in specific institutional contexts.

Data Sources

Primary data consisted of official policy documents issued by the NUC, specifically the CCMAS for Education (2022/2023), with particular focus on the B.Sc. (Ed.) Economics Education programme and the entrepreneurship modules ENT 211 and ENT 312. Secondary data were drawn from the World Bank's (2025) Sustainable Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa report, used as an evaluative benchmark for assessing the curriculum's responsiveness to emerging green skills requirements and future labour market trends. These sources enabled a multi-layered analysis of curriculum design, implementation intent, and global contextual relevance.

Analytical Procedure: The Curriculum Audit Model

Data collection and analysis were structured around the Curriculum Audit Model developed by English (1988), which evaluates the workability and adequacy of curricula through a systematic three-stage process designed to move beyond descriptive review toward functional evaluation of curriculum relevance.

The first stage involved content mapping: the systematic extraction of learning outcomes and competency statements related to technical skills and entrepreneurship from the CCMAS documents. The second stage entailed niche alignment: in which extracted content was mapped against five self-employment pathways: EdTech consultancy, data research services, private tutoring, financial advisory services, and green economy services. The third stage consisted of thematic interrogation: through which patterns of "theoretical saturation" and "curricular silence" were identified, enabling the structural dimensions of the utility gap to be systematically characterized.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis guided by grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The CareerEDGE model (Koseda et al., 2026) was employed as a coding framework, enabling curricular elements to be categorized across three functional domains: (a) D–Knowledge: capturing the depth and breadth of theoretical and pedagogical content. (b) E–Skills: representing practical, work-ready competencies including technical proficiency, and (c) G–Agency: reflecting the graduate's capacity for independent economic action, opportunity recognition, and market participation. Analytical attention was directed at the entrepreneurship modules (ENT 211 and ENT 312), to determine whether they cultivate discipline-specific entrepreneurial agency or merely provide generalized business knowledge.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, researcher triangulation was employed, involving cross-referencing of CCMAS findings against the preceding BMAS framework and contemporary labour market analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This triangulation situates curriculum analysis within both historical and contemporary economic contexts, reducing the risk of conclusions that are grounded in isolated policy assumptions.

A recognized limitation of this study is that, as a documentary analysis, it is delimited to the formal intended curriculum as captured in policy documents and does not capture the enacted curriculum, the actual instructional delivery by faculty in specific institutional settings. This study is therefore understood as a foundational baseline for future empirical research involving stakeholder interviews, classroom observation, and longitudinal graduate surveys.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structural Audit: The Dominance of Theoretical Saturation

The curriculum audit revealed a persistent structural imbalance within the CCMAS for Education Economics. Despite the nominal transition from the BMAS, the curriculum remains characterized by theoretical saturation (Adebayo & Ogunleye, 2023): the 70% national core is heavily anchored in abstract classical economic models, with limited accommodation for applied or practice-oriented content. From a Human Capital Theory

perspective (Schultz, 1961), this represents a misallocation of educational investment, graduates accumulate substantial theoretical capital while acquiring limited market utility.

The 30% institutional component, which was explicitly designed to promote innovation and local responsiveness, is frequently underutilized. Rather than providing functional differentiation, it tends to reproduce theoretical content drawn from the national core. From a constructivist standpoint, this constitutes a missed opportunity for contextually grounded, experiential learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, the ENT 211 and ENT 312 entrepreneurship modules remain "sector-agnostic": they provide generalized business knowledge without the discipline-specific application that would equip Education Economics graduates to pursue viable niches in the contemporary economy.

Pedagogical and Technological Dynamics

Despite the CCMAS's explicit references to 21st-century competencies, including artificial intelligence and digital literacy, instructional practice remains predominantly lecture-driven and examination-focused. This pedagogical stagnation (Ogunode & Josiah, 2023) systematically inhibits the development of transferable competencies. The gap between curricular aspirations and institutional reality constitutes what this study terms "technological decoupling": policy mandates for digital competence exist on paper but cannot be operationalized in the absence of requisite laboratory infrastructure and qualified faculty, rendering digital literacy conceptual rather than functional.

The Skills Gap and Sustainability Deficit

The audit identified a significant absence of mandated technical competencies within the CCMAS framework. The curriculum is "software-neutral," making no provision for instruction in industry-standard data analytics tools such as STATA, Python, or PowerBI. This finding confirms Agaba's (2025) certification–competency paradox: graduates emerge from the programme academically certified but technically underprepared for the analytical demands of contemporary employment or self-employment.

Equally significant is the curriculum's "future-blind" orientation with respect to the green economy. The CCMAS demonstrates minimal engagement with the sustainable development competencies that the World Bank (2025) identifies as central to sub-Saharan African economic transformation. This is particularly consequential for Education Economics graduates, given that green finance, sustainable school management, and green educational consultancy represent significant and underexploited entrepreneurial niches. By failing to integrate these competencies, the CCMAS widens the gap between Nigerian graduates and their counterparts in economies that have already begun integrating sustainability into tertiary education frameworks.

The Intent–Action Gap and the Absence of Entrepreneurial Agency

Perhaps the most consequential finding of this audit is the gap between entrepreneurial awareness and entrepreneurial action. While the CCMAS articulates job creation as an intended graduate outcome, it fails to provide the experiential mechanisms, including internships, incubation programmes, and industry-linked projects necessary to cultivate the entrepreneurial agency described by Bandura (2001). This finding reflects a structural breakdown in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991): entrepreneurial intention does not translate into action when graduates lack perceived behavioural control and institutional enabling conditions.

Synthesis of Findings

The audit provides systematic responses to each of the study's research questions. In terms of practical integration, the curriculum demonstrates substantial theoretical depth, but lacks applied technical skills training and mandatory software instruction. With respect to niche identification, the CCMAS fails to provide structured pathways into discipline-specific self-employment niches such as EdTech or educational consultancy. Regarding future-readiness, the curriculum exhibits significant curricular silence on green skills and sustainability, anchoring graduates in an outdated economic paradigm. Finally, on the dimension of entrepreneurial agency, the transition from knowledge to action remains unsupported: without experiential learning and incubation infrastructure, graduates remain "economically inactive" despite being "academically qualified."

BMAS versus CCMAS: Functional Continuity

Taken as a whole, the audit suggests that while the CCMAS introduces structural innovations in the form of the 70/30 curriculum architecture, the transition from the BMAS is largely semantic rather than transformative. The reform prioritizes structural redesign over functional transformation, reproducing the same utility gap that characterized the preceding framework. These findings are consistent with Okebukola's (2023) assessment that Nigerian curriculum reform has historically privileged terminological modernization over substantive pedagogical change.

Conclusion

The transition from the BMAS to the CCMAS represents a necessary and well-intentioned intervention in Nigerian university education. The structural innovations introduced most notably the 70/30 curriculum flexibility, and the explicit incorporation of entrepreneurship modules reflect a genuine recognition of the need to align tertiary education with 21st-century economic realities. However, in the context of Education Economics, this study finds that the reform remains substantially incomplete.

The CCMAS continues to exhibit theoretical saturation, technological decoupling, and curricular silence on emerging sectors such as the green economy. Its entrepreneurship

provisions, while structurally present, are insufficiently discipline-specific to cultivate the economic agency required for self-employment in a dynamic and competitive market. The potential for innovation embedded in the 30% institutional component has gone largely unrealized, constrained by infrastructural deficits and the absence of pedagogical transformation at the faculty level.

The overarching conclusion is that the current reform is more semantic than functional: it updates the terminology of Nigerian university education without substantively transforming graduate capability. Until curriculum reform in Nigeria is evaluated and operationalized through the lens of functional utility rather than structural compliance, the higher education system will continue to produce graduates who are academically certified but economically constrained. Bridging the utility gap is not merely an educational objective, it is an imperative for national economic transformation.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

I. Universities offering Education Economics programmes should integrate mandatory instruction in industry-standard analytical tools, including STATA, Python, and PowerBI to shift the curriculum from theoretical orientation toward market-ready applicability.
II. The NUC should redesign the ENT 211 and ENT 312 entrepreneurship modules to move beyond generic business concepts, incorporating discipline-specific content focused on EdTech venture development, private educational consultancy, and data research services.
III. The NUC and the Federal Ministry of Education should lead a coordinated reform initiative to embed green skills and sustainability principles explicitly within the Education Economics curriculum framework, in alignment with global sustainable development agendas.
IV. The Federal Government of Nigeria and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) should prioritise funding for "Education-Data Labs" and digital resource centres. University managements must complement procurement with sustained maintenance and monitoring protocols to prevent technological decoupling during implementation.
V. Universities should establish education-focused innovation hubs and incubation programmes to provide Education Economics students with experiential learning opportunities and structured pathways to real-world venture creation.

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