

POLICY BRIEF

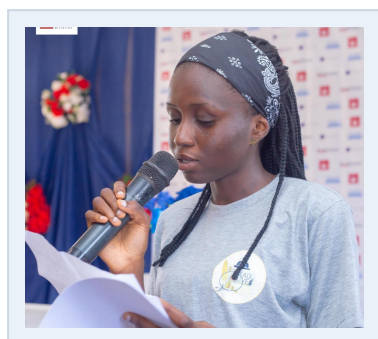
iRead To Live Initiative

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Beyond the Cut-Off Mark

Two Proposals for a Fairer UTME System: Recommendations to the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board for the 2027 UTME

iRead To Live Initiative | July 2026

2.24MUTME candidates,
2026**700K**Absorbed
annually**1.2M+**Locked out
each year**17.1%**Scored above 200
in 2026**255**Universities in
Nigeria, 2026

A contestant addresses the audience during the iRead To Live Annual Literacy Competition.

About This Brief

Published by iRead To Live Initiative, a Nigerian higher education policy think tank producing independent, evidence-based research on admissions and access, student welfare, financing, and graduate outcomes.

Nigeria's university admissions system faces a structural crisis that no single examination reform can resolve. In 2026, 2,243,816 candidates registered for the UTME. Nigeria's universities can absorb only approximately 700,000 students annually (NUC, as cited in Nairametrics, 2024). More than 1.2 million qualified candidates are turned away every year, not for failing the examination, but because the system simply has no room for them (Nigeria Education News, 2025).

This is not primarily a JAMB problem. The capacity gap between Nigerians who aspire to university education and the places available is ultimately a Federal Government and National Universities Commission responsibility. But JAMB sits at the centre of the admissions system, and what JAMB does with its data, its technology policies, and its communications to candidates shapes whether the system is experienced as fair, transparent, and equitable, or arbitrary, opaque, and exclusionary.

Professor Segun Aina assumes office as JAMB's Registrar on August 1, 2026, at age 39, the youngest Registrar in the Board's history. He is a Professor of Computer Engineering at Obafemi Awolowo University with a PhD in Digital Signal Processing from Loughborough University (Channels Television, 2026; BusinessDay, 2026). He inherits an institution transformed by his predecessor: over N50 billion remitted to the Federal Government, malpractice cases down 58 percent in three years, and a Central Admissions Processing System that eliminated the backdoor admissions culture of previous decades (Ghanamma, 2026; Tribune Online, 2026).

He also inherits specific challenges. The 2025 UTME was disrupted by a server patch error affecting 380,000 candidates concentrated in Lagos and the South-East (AllAfrica, 2025). The 2026 Mock UTME failed its quality assurance purpose, forcing a mop-up examination after the same technical failures recurred in the main cycle (Punch Newspapers, 2026). And the outgoing Registrar announced at the May 2026 Policy Meeting that JAMB would introduce a Bring Your Own Device option for the 2027 UTME, without publishing an equity impact assessment or implementation guidelines (Vanguard News, 2026).

This brief advances two proposals. The first addresses the transparency deficit in how JAMB uses its own data. The second addresses the equity risks embedded in the BYOD announcement and JAMB's broader digital expansion. Together, they constitute a practical agenda for the first year of a new Registrar whose professional expertise is precisely matched to these challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

JAMB under Professor Segun Aina must make Nigeria's university admissions system more transparent, evidence-based, and equitable. The six actions below are achievable within the eight months between his assumption of office and the commencement of the 2027 UTME cycle.

Publish disaggregated admissions data. Release UTME performance and admission statistics broken down by gender, state of origin, secondary school type, and local government area within 60 days of each examination cycle concluding.

Evidence-base the cut-off mark. Commission and publish an analysis of the relationship between UTME scores and university academic performance before the 2027 Policy Meeting.

Publish an annual Admissions and Access Report. Within 90 days of each UTME results release, publish a comprehensive report covering who applied, who was admitted, and where the gaps are by state, gender, and institution type.

Delay BYOD pending an equity assessment. Commission an independent equity impact assessment, publish the findings, and announce a device access programme for candidates who cannot afford personal computers before any implementation proceeds.

Expand CBT coverage to underserved LGAs. Publish a CBT centre coverage map and set measurable targets for reducing maximum travel distance in the North-East, North-West, and rural Middle Belt.

Make CBT readiness mandatory. Require all first-time UTME candidates to complete a structured CBT readiness module before examination registration is confirmed, delivered through secondary schools and JAMB's CBT networks.

Implementation Timeline: August 2026 to the 2027 UTME Cycle

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| Aug 1, 2026 | ● Professor Segun Aina assumes office as JAMB Registrar. |
| Within 60 days | ● Publish disaggregated admissions data for the 2026 UTME cycle by gender, state, school type, and local government area. |
| Before the 2027 Policy Meeting | ● Commission and publish the evidence base for the national minimum cut-off mark. |
| 2027 | ● Commission an independent BYOD equity and cybersecurity assessment; expand CBT coverage and readiness training ahead of the 2027 UTME. |
| Within 90 days of 2027 results | ● Publish the first Annual Admissions and Access Report. |

The Access Crisis: Background

Nigeria's higher education system has grown rapidly. From five universities in 1960, the country now has 255, comprising 52 federal, 58 state, and 145 private institutions (School Registry NG, 2026). Yet the rate of candidate growth has outpaced institutional expansion. UTME registrations grew from 1.72 million in 2017 to 2.24 million in 2026, while institutional absorptive capacity has remained fixed at approximately 700,000 places (WithinNigeria, 2026).

Comparative research in international higher education identifies this dynamic as characteristic of systems in which demand expands faster than supply, intensifying competition for a fixed stock of places and systematically disadvantaging candidates who lack access to examination preparation resources (Marginson, 2016).

Nigeria has approximately 1.2 universities per million people, compared to South Africa's 3.5, Kenya's 2.8, and the global average of higher-middle-income countries (School Registry NG, 2026).

In 2026, less than one percent of candidates crossed the 300-point threshold. Only 17.1 percent scored above 200, the practical floor for competitive university consideration (AndroidPols, 2026). This pattern of mass underperformance below 200 has persisted for over a decade (AllAfrica, 2025), suggesting systemic rather than individual causes.

Research on examination equity in developing country contexts demonstrates that performance on standardised tests correlates significantly with access to preparation resources: quality secondary schooling, examination coaching, stable electricity for CBT practice, and computer literacy (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). Where these resources are distributed unequally, as they are in Nigeria, examination scores measure access as much as academic potential.

JAMB's 2024-2028 Strategic Roadmap for Inclusive Access to Quality Higher Education, published on its official website (JAMB, 2024), signals an institutional commitment to addressing these dynamics. The two proposals in this brief are designed to translate that commitment into concrete, measurable action.

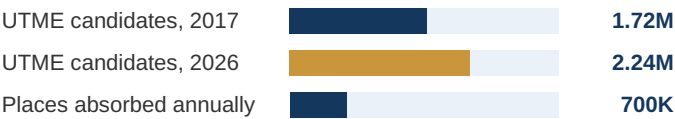
One governance dimension deserves particular emphasis. The Governance Symmetry Model, an analytical framework developed through iRead To Live Initiative's research programme, diagnoses the accountability gap that arises when JAMB exercises authority over 2.24 million candidates without formal accountability mechanisms running downward toward those candidates (iRead To Live Initiative, 2026). Both proposals in this brief are designed to close that gap.

The national minimum cut-off mark for university admission, approved at 150 at the 2026 Policy Meeting (JAMB, 2026a), illustrates the transparency deficit directly. The evidence basis for this threshold has not been published. Research on quality assurance in higher education identifies the absence of publicly accountable standards as a fundamental governance deficit (Dill, 2007). An institution that cannot justify its own pass marks to the public has a credibility gap that undermines the legitimacy of every admission decision made against those marks.

Comparative Note

Nigeria's 1.2 universities per million people places its admissions bottleneck among the most severe in Sub-Saharan Africa, a comparative reference point for the governance reforms proposed in this brief.

The Widening Gap: Candidates vs. Capacity



Source: WithinNigeria (2026); Nairametrics (2024).

The Two Proposals

Proposal 1: Make Admissions Data Work for Access

JAMB produces a substantial volume of data each examination cycle: registration numbers, performance distributions, CAPS admission records, centre-level technical statistics, and malpractice detection counts. What it does not do is present that data in a form that allows researchers, policymakers, journalists, or candidates to understand who gains access to Nigerian universities, who does not, and why.

The most consequential missing element is disaggregation. Aggregate statistics showing that 17.1 percent of candidates scored above 200 (AndroidPols, 2026) do not reveal whether that proportion is similar for male and female candidates, for candidates from Borno and candidates from Lagos, for candidates from federal government colleges and those from underfunded state schools. Without this disaggregation, it is impossible to determine whether JAMB's examination design produces equitable outcomes across Nigeria's diverse candidate population (Tikly and Barrett, 2011; UNESCO, 2022).

The national minimum cut-off mark carries similar transparency problems. The 150-point floor approved at the 2026 Policy Meeting (JAMB, 2026a) was reached through a vote of vice-chancellors. The evidence basis for this threshold, specifically whether a score of 150 reliably predicts readiness for university-level academic work, has not been made public.

What JAMB Must Do, What the National Assembly Must Enable

Nigeria's National Assembly has debated higher education reform in multiple legislative sessions without establishing a statutory requirement for JAMB or the NUC to publish disaggregated admissions data. The Education Reform Act and its attendant regulations do not currently require this level of transparency. Professor Aina need not wait for legislative action. The Board already holds the registration data, examination performance data, and CAPS admission records needed to produce an annual Admissions and Access Report. The necessary step is the institutional decision to publish it.

Professor Aina should direct JAMB's research division to produce and publish, within 90 days of the 2027 UTME results release, the first Annual Admissions and Access Report. This report should cover registration numbers by state, gender, and school type; performance distributions disaggregated by the same dimensions; CAPS admission rates by institution type; and a year-on-year comparison. iRead To Live will publish an independent analysis of each report as part of our annual research programme. At the same time, we call on the National Assembly's Committee on Education to take up the statutory dimension: a Nigerian higher education transparency framework that mandates disaggregated admissions data from all tertiary institutions would create the accountability infrastructure that the country currently lacks.

Proposal 2: Fix the Equity Gap Before Going Digital

At the May 2026 Policy Meeting, outgoing Registrar Oloyede announced that JAMB would introduce a Bring Your Own Device option for the 2027 UTME, with candidates permitted to use personal computers and a flash drive inserted to prevent malpractice (Vanguard News, 2026; Blueprint Newspapers, 2026). The rationale was that BYOD would reduce operational costs and address complaints about examination computer failures.

Both concerns are legitimate. CBT centre computers do fail. Operational costs do matter. But the equity implications of requiring candidates to bring personal computers to a national examination, in a country where 63 percent of the population lives in multidimensional poverty (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), have not been assessed. Research on BYOD policies in assessment contexts consistently documents that requiring candidates to provide their own devices produces performance differentials correlated with socioeconomic status, because device quality, software familiarity, and maintenance vary systematically across income groups (Dawson, 2016; Henderson, Selwyn, and Aston, 2017).

The Warri remote access breach of 2026, in which unknown operators gained illegal access to examination computer networks during the live UTME (JAMB, 2026b; Legit.ng, 2026b), makes the cybersecurity dimension equally urgent. Personal devices carry individually varying operating system configurations and unpatched vulnerabilities that make network-level security standardisation significantly harder than with institutional CBT hardware. Professor Aina, who holds an MSc in Internet Computing and Network Security, is better placed than any of his predecessors to understand this risk (BusinessDay, 2026).

iRead To Live's position is that BYOD is not inherently wrong as a long-term direction. Implemented in 2027 without an equity impact assessment and without a device access programme for candidates who cannot afford computers, it would entrench rather than reduce access inequalities. Professor Aina should delay BYOD to 2028, commission an independent equity and cybersecurity assessment in 2027, and announce the delay transparently. Alongside this, JAMB should expand CBT centre coverage to underserved local government areas and mandate CBT readiness training for first-time candidates from public secondary schools, ensuring that the examination is fair whether a candidate uses an institutional computer or eventually their own.

"JAMB cannot expand Nigeria's university capacity. But it can ensure that who gets in, and who does not, is determined by a process that is transparent, evidence-based, and fair."

iRead To Live's Call to Professor Aina



Student contestants at the iRead To Live Annual Literacy Competition, one of the initiative's flagship literacy programmes.

Professor Aina assumes office with a mandate to build on what Oloyede built and to take JAMB further. Building on it means protecting the financial integrity, the CAPS transparency, and the anti-malpractice institutional culture that distinguish JAMB from most Nigerian government agencies (Tribune Online, 2026; Guardian Nigeria, 2025). Taking it further means confronting the access and equity challenges that a decade of operational reform has not yet addressed.

The two proposals in this brief do not require new legislation, a supplementary budget, or new data collection systems. They require the decision to publish what JAMB already knows, the discipline to delay a well-intentioned technology policy until its equity implications have been properly assessed, and the commitment to treat Nigeria's 2.24 million UTME candidates not merely as examination takers but as the primary stakeholders of the institution's work.

iRead To Live Initiative will publish an independent analysis of JAMB's progress on these proposals in our annual Admissions and Access research series. We are available to support the new administration with research partnership, data methodology consultation, and policy analysis.

About iRead To Live Initiative

iRead To Live Initiative is a Nigerian higher education policy think tank producing independent, evidence-based research and advancing policy reform across four focal areas: university admissions and access, student affairs and campus welfare, financial aid and education financing, and career development and graduate outcomes.

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