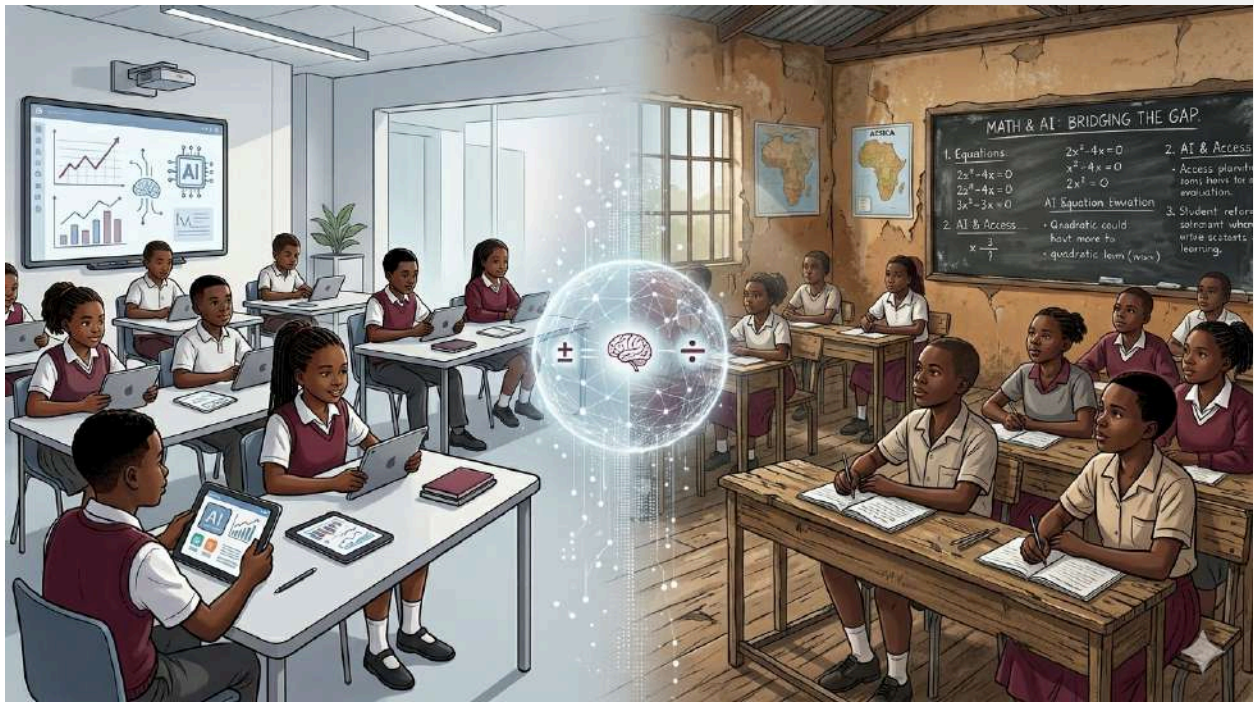


Artificial Inequalities: How AI Could Widen the Gap Between Privileged and Underserved Students

by **Akolade Oladipupo** [March 2026]



How AI could widen the gap between privileged and underserved students [Source: Generated with Gemini (March 21 2026)]

‘The world is facing two crises in education:

- the growing inequality gap among students
- a system that leaves too many students unprepared for jobs in the 21st century”

- Dr Caroline Varin, CEO of Professors Without Borders¹

This is a deceptively simple observation. But contained within it are two distinct problems that education systems across the world, and particularly

across Africa, have struggled to confront simultaneously.

The second crisis is visible and loudly debated. The pace of technological change has outrun the ability of formal education to keep up. By the time a curriculum is reviewed, approved, and rolled out, the skills it was designed to teach are already evolving. Institutions respond slowly; the world does not wait. Online learning platforms, short courses, and professional certifications have stepped into that gap

¹ Professors Without Borders. (n.d.). [Who we are.](#)

with varying degrees of success, offering learners a way to stay relevant outside the traditional classroom.

But it is the first crisis that this article is concerned with. The inequality gap. Because however urgent the question of curriculum relevance may be, it sits on top of a more elementary and more stubborn problem: not every student begins from the same place. And if we do not take that seriously, the technologies we introduce to improve education will simply reward those already ahead.

In 2021, a quiet but telling statistic passed largely without public alarm: 89% of learners in sub-Saharan Africa had no access to a household computer, 82% lacked home internet access, and at least 20 million lived in areas not even covered by a mobile network.² These are not footnotes. They are the foundation upon which we are now being asked to build an artificial intelligence revolution in education.

The arrival of AI in education is genuinely exciting. In a [previous piece](#), I explored how AI tools can meaningfully improve teaching delivery and learning experiences when thoughtfully deployed.³ That argument still holds. But a technology's promise and its reality on the ground are often two very different things. And in the African context, the gap between those two things has historically been vast.

The Paradox of Emerging Technology

Emerging technologies have always been paradoxical in the way they distribute their benefits. Early adopters and privileged individuals are typically the ones who engage rapidly, learn the features, test the limits, and position themselves to leverage new tools for professional and personal advancement. They explore, fail, iterate, and eventually master. The less privileged, by contrast, play perpetual catch-up. By the time access reaches them, the game has already moved on.

This is not a new observation. The sociologist Everett Rogers noted it in his landmark work on the diffusion of innovations as far back as 1962, identifying how social and economic status consistently predicts who adopts new technology first.⁴ What is new is the speed and scale of AI, and the consequence of being left behind this time. As the Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz has argued, technology without redistribution widens inequality.⁵ AI, left to its own devices, does not recognise postcodes or school funding gaps. It rewards those already positioned to use it.

The Reality on the Ground

To understand why AI risks deepening educational inequality in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa, you do not need to look at abstract projections. You need only look at what is already happening.

Consider a student preparing for Nigeria's Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), administered by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). The examination has been computer-based since 2014. That is a reasonable and forward-thinking policy on paper. But for a student from a rural public school in Nigeria, where there is no computer lab, no reliable electricity, and no prior exposure to any digital device, sitting that exam involves much more than answering correctly. It involves confronting an entirely unfamiliar system under timed exam conditions.

The data confirms what anyone paying attention already suspects. A peer-reviewed study on the impact of the digital divide on UTME performance in Osun State found that all students from private schools had prior computer experience, whereas 11% of students from public schools had never used a computer before the exam. Of those students with no prior computer experience, 63% were from rural public schools.⁶ The study found a clear, positive

² Mo Ibrahim Foundation. (2021). [2021 Ibrahim Forum Report: Education in Africa](#). Mo Ibrahim Foundation.

³ Oladipupo, A. (2026, March). [AI in Education: A Valuable Ally to Improve Education Delivery, Teaching and Learning Experience](#). LEAP Africa.

⁴ Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovations*. Free Press.

⁵ Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). [The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our future](#). W. W. Norton & Company.

⁶ Abdulkareem, Z., & Lennon, M. (2025). [Impact of digital divide on students' performance in computerised UTME in Nigeria](#). *Information Development*, 41(4), 1265–1280.

correlation between computer familiarity and UTME performance.

In 2024, approximately 76% of the 1.9 million candidates who sat the UTME scored below 200 out of 400. In 2025, the figure remained deeply alarming, with over 1.5 million of approximately 1.96 million candidates scoring below 200.⁷ Experts pointed, among other factors, to computer illiteracy, particularly among rural and public school candidates, as a structural contributor to the poor outcomes.⁶ In fact, many students encounter a computer for the very first time on the day of their JAMB examination.

Assessment is supposed to be conducted on a level field. It cannot be, when the medium of assessment has already conferred an advantage on some candidates and placed others at a fundamental disadvantage, even before a single question has been read.

And this is just the baseline challenge with CBT. We are not yet talking about AI.

When AI Enters the Equation

Now imagine that same divide applied not just to the format of an examination, but to every stage of learning. That is precisely what the unchecked integration of AI into education risks producing.

Picture two students given the same assignment: prepare a presentation or produce an infographic on a topic of their choice. The student in a well-resourced private school has, almost certainly, been experimenting with AI tools. She has used ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas, an AI image generator to produce visuals, and perhaps Canva's AI features to design slides. The task feels manageable. Even enjoyable. She has iterated, refined, and arrived at a polished product.

Her counterpart in an under-resourced public school, or a school in a rural community, has heard of

ChatGPT, possibly, but has no reliable internet to access it, no device of his own, and no teacher who has been trained to introduce it. He approaches the assignment the conventional way. He gets it done. But the gap in the quality of output, and more significantly, the gap in the learning experience, the exposure to new tools, the confidence built through repeated use, is not neutral. It compounds.

UNESCO has recognised the potential of generative AI tools to worsen what it calls digital poverty, identifying the digital divide as a critical concern in the integration of AI tools into classroom settings.⁸ The point is not merely that some students lack access to devices. It is that access to AI tools varies dramatically across income levels, with some students having access to more advanced, paid models than others. This disparity, as Perkins and colleagues note, raises direct concerns about equity in academic settings, particularly in the Global South.⁹

Where basic power supply is still a luxury, where students study by lamplight, where an entire family may share a single mobile phone with intermittent data, the promise of AI as an educational equaliser is, at best, aspirational. At worst, it is a polite fiction that papers over a structural injustice.

The Infrastructure Reality

The numbers are stark. As of 2023, only about 37% of the African population used the internet, with high costs cited as the primary barrier, especially in low-income and rural areas.¹⁰ Sub-Saharan Africa's internet penetration stagnated at 36% in 2023, while 87% of students in high-income countries had home internet access, compared to just 6% in low-income countries.¹¹

According to the 2024 Government AI Readiness Index, sub-Saharan Africa has the least prepared AI

⁷ Akhimien, N. (2025, May 5). [2025 UTME: JAMB Says Over 1.5m Candidates Scored Below 200](#), Channels Television.

⁸ UNESCO. (2023). [Guidance for generative artificial intelligence in education and research](#). UNESCO.

⁹ Perkins, M., Furze, L., Roe, J., & MacVaugh, J. (2024). [The Artificial Intelligence Assessment Scale \(AIAS\): A framework for ethical integration of generative AI in educational assessment](#). *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(6), 1–20.

¹⁰ International Telecommunication Union. (2023). [Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2023](#). ITU.

¹¹ UNESCO. (2023). [Global education monitoring report 2023: Technology in education](#). UNESCO Publishing.

Some practical recommendations are outlined below

Recommendation	Responsible Stakeholders
Establish Future Literacy Clubs in schools: student-led spaces focused on digital and AI literacy that evolve as technology changes, ensuring continuity beyond any single tool or trend.	Federal and State Ministries of Education; School heads; NGOs; CSOs
Mandate digital literacy training for teachers and educators, with ongoing support, not one-off workshops. Teachers cannot introduce tools they do not understand.	National and State governments; National teacher unions and education commissions; Universal Basic Education bodies
Partner with MOOC platforms and edtech providers to develop freely accessible, locally contextualised digital literacy courses in local languages.	Ministries of Education; National education trust funds such as TETFund (Nigeria); private sector technology firms including African-founded edtech companies such as uLesson and M-Shule
Prioritise digital infrastructure investment in under-resourced and rural schools: computer labs, reliable electricity, and low-cost internet access.	Federal and State governments; national universal education commissions; development partners including the World Bank, UNICEF, and the African Development Bank
Develop national guidelines on the equitable integration of AI in education and assessment, including provisions for standardising which AI tools are permitted in academic settings.	National curriculum and education research bodies; national examination agencies such as JAMB (Nigeria), KNEC (Kenya), and WAEC; higher education commissions across the continent
Expand CBT preparation programmes, making them free, widespread, and integrated into the formal school curriculum rather than leaving families to fund private training.	National examination agencies such as JAMB (Nigeria) and KNEC (Kenya); State and national Ministries of Education; NGOs
Direct funding toward AI equity in African education, prioritising under-resourced and rural schools rather than elite institutions.	International development organisations and foundations such as UNESCO; UNICEF; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; the Mastercard Foundation; multilateral development banks including the World Bank and the African Development Bank

There is a particular cruelty in a technology that arrives dressed as an equaliser but operates, in practice, as a multiplier of existing advantage. AI is not inherently malicious. It does not set out to disadvantage the student from the rural public school or the under-resourced community school. But indifference, in the face of structural inequality, produces outcomes that are no less unequal.

The students who risk being left behind by the AI revolution are not abstract. They are sitting in classrooms without electricity, preparing for

examinations on computers they have never used, in schools staffed by teachers who have never been trained to use the tools now being positioned as the future of learning. They deserve better than a revolution that passes them by.

The question is not whether AI will transform education. It will. The question is whether we are willing to do the hard, unglamorous, expensive work of ensuring that transformation reaches everyone. Not just the privileged. Not just the already connected. Everyone.