Digital Literacy in EdTech: The Foundation We Are Skipping

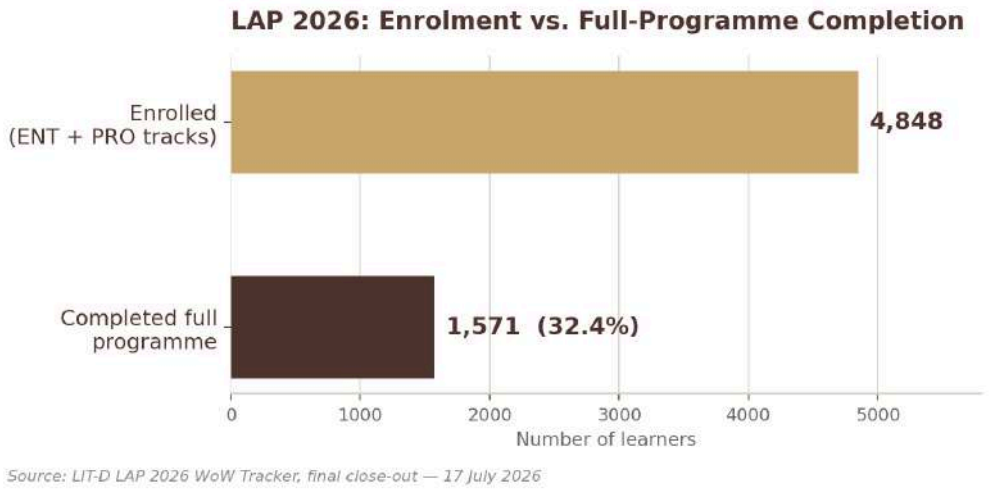
Across Pan-African EdTech, we usually judge digital transformation by surface-level numbers: platform uptime, new features, enrolment spikes. When we're getting ready for a new cohort, our first questions are almost always technical: do the logins work, do the servers hold, does registration run smoothly?

But working on the ground with our learning platform at LEAP Africa tells a different story. The real bottleneck in digital education is rarely the platform itself; it's the everyday friction learners run into before real learning even starts.

LEAP Africa's programmes such as the Youth Leadership Development Programme (YLDP), the Social Innovation Programme (SIP), and the Leadership Accelerator Programme (LAP), among others, reach thousands of young Nigerians and Pan-African leaders each year; however, a recurring pattern has been noted

- Learners struggle to locate assigned modules despite receiving clear, step-by-step email notifications.
- Participants send support emails asking questions explicitly answered in the body of the message they were replying to.
- Enrolled users become silent because they lack the confidence or technical vocabulary to articulate a digital error.
- Participants complete registration with enthusiasm, only to drop off before taking their first action inside the LMS.

LAP 2026, one of our flagship programmes, enrolled 4,848 learners across two tracks of Entrepreneurship (ENT) and Professional (PRO). Even with the programme's full ten-week window, only 1,571 of them (32.4%) completed the course.



Source: LIT-D LAP 2026 WoW Tracker, final close-out — 17 July 2026

This isn't a story about lack of interest. Initially, these were viewed as one-time technical glitches. Over time, the recurring pattern led to a more difficult question:

> *Have we assumed digital readiness across Africa simply because people have digital access?*

Access Is Not Readiness

Across the continent, governments, funders, and non-profits are pouring money into digital learning with virtual academies, AI tools, and ambitious registration targets.

A 2024 report from the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa and the African Union puts real weight behind this: digital technology is being positioned as a central lever for transforming STEM and education across the continent. Those are real wins. But they hide a simple truth.

> *Owning a smartphone is not the same as knowing how to learn on one.*

Researchers Paul Kirschner and Pedro De Bruyckere found something worth sitting with: being comfortable on WhatsApp or TikTok doesn't automatically make someone comfortable on a learning platform. Those apps are built to ask almost nothing of you: swipe, tap, scroll. A learning platform asks for the opposite: find the right file, follow multi-step instructions, manage your own time, navigate folders you've never seen before.

Hand someone a sophisticated platform without noticing that gap, and they'll spend more energy fighting the software than learning anything from it.

The Frontline Operational Reality Across Africa

From a learning operations perspective, learner disengagement is rarely a sign of low intelligence or a lack of ambition. Instead, it reflects varying baseline entry points across our continent's educational systems.

According to UNESCO's Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy, true digital competence requires the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, and communicate information effectively. When African learners enter an LMS without these baseline competencies, operational friction manifests in three major ways:

Instructional and Linguistic Overload: Learners struggle to interpret complex instructional syntax or distinguish between multiple hyperlinked resources, leading to cognitive paralysis and platform abandonment.

Communication Anxiety: Many learners struggle with formal digital channels. This issue goes beyond mere shyness; some learners genuinely lack the vocabulary to articulate what's wrong. We often receive emails indicating that something is broken, but the learner can't pinpoint the specific issue. Rather than send an unclear message, many choose to fall silent; they watch from the sidelines, stop logging in, or simply disappear. Between May and September 2026, problems related to "logging in," "navigating the platform," or "figuring out how to sign up" accounted for 52 of the 107 support tickets documented. Notably, these issues often arise right as a programme is concluding, rather than when the learner initially encounters difficulties.

Data and Power Infrastructure Constraints: Long, uncompressed videos may be a luxury for those on limited data plans, particularly when power outages are frequent. What might appear as a learner giving up is sometimes just an indication of these external challenges.

Accessibility and Assistive Learning Gaps: For learners who are blind, deaf, dyslexic, or process information differently, a typical Learning Management System (LMS) can pose significant barriers. Challenges such as screen readers that cannot access menus, videos without captions, PDFs that are not navigable via keyboard, and timed tests that penalize different processing speeds instead of assessing understanding create obstacles for these individuals. Often, these learners disengage not because they lack ability, but because the platform does not meet their needs. This situation likely leads to an underestimation of the number of individuals affected.

When viewed individually, these challenges may appear as four separate concerns. However, when considered together, they tell the same story: learners arrive without the foundational skills the platform assumes they possess, and design choices that widen the gap affect those who are already struggling the most.

The Myth of the AI Leapfrog

There's a real temptation across African EdTech to skip straight to AI tutors and flashy new platforms, as if better technology can outrun a problem this basic. It can't.

> *Expecting a learner who struggles with basic digital navigation to thrive under an AI tutor is a fundamental miscalculation.*

All that does is put a shinier interface on top of the same unsolved problem. If we actually want something to show for all this investment, two things have to happen:

- Digital literacy needs a real place in national curricula, not a one-off orientation session
- And it needs to be taught with the context of how our learners actually live: low-data, mobile-first, in language that matches their world.

What This Actually Looks Like

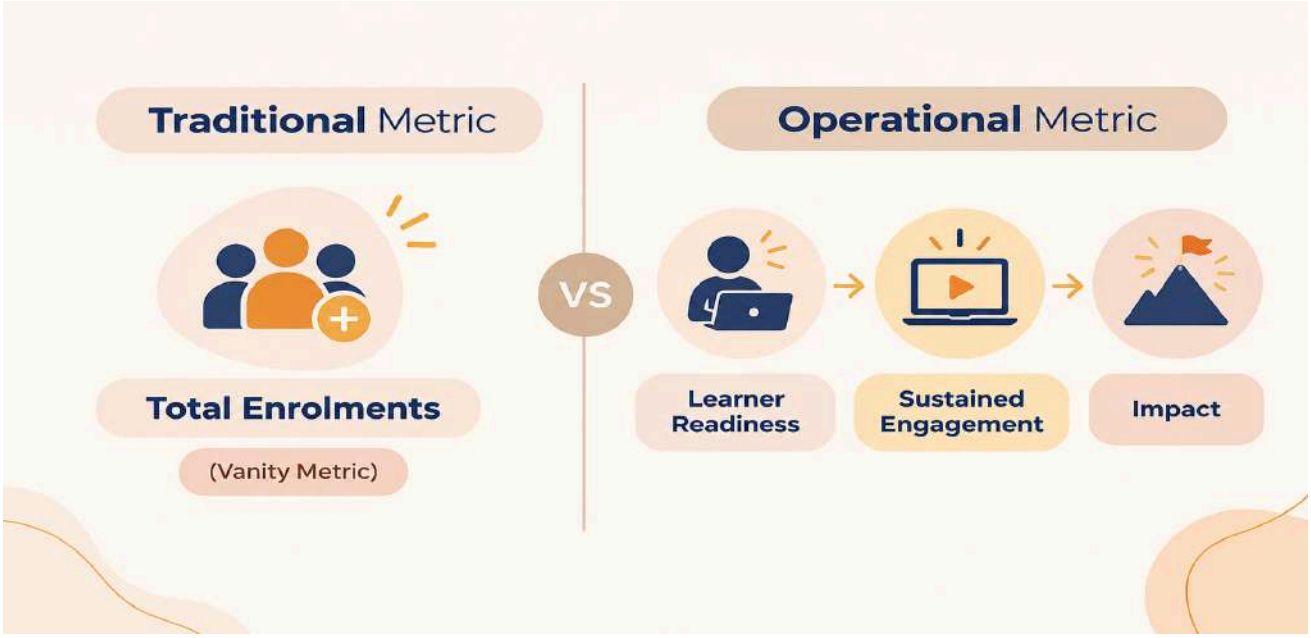
Digital readiness can't be the learner's job alone. Everyone in the chain has a part to play:

Programme teams and Facilitators: Build a short, low-stakes onboarding step before the real content starts. Teach people how to find a file and how to ask for help, as deliberately as you'd teach the actual subject.

Curriculum designers: Break big tasks into small ones (psychologist John Sweller's well-known finding that people learn better in smaller pieces), and offer a text-based alternative alongside every video for learners on limited data.

Donors and Corporate Partners: Treat digital literacy and learner support as part of the actual project, not a footnote on the budget.

Platform Designers and EdTech Builders: Design for accessibility from day one: screen readers that work, captions on every video, keyboards that can navigate everything, flexible timing on assessments. Disability isn't a rare edge case in African education. Designing for the person furthest behind makes the platform better for everyone else too.



> *Enrolment tells you who showed up. Weekly progress tells you who was actually able to stay.*

Conclusion

Digital transformation in education was never really about the software. It's about people. We can celebrate AI, invest in shiny platforms, and post big enrolment numbers; but if learners are still getting stuck at the front door, we're not building anything new. We're just building a more expensive version of the same old exclusion.

> *Digital readiness is not a nice-to-have. It is the foundation everything else is built on. Until we treat it that way, every AI tool and every enrolment milestone risks becoming a number that flatters us while our learners fall quietly behind.*

References

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About the Author

Folashade (Fola) Omidiora is the Learning Innovation and Technology Senior Officer at LEAP Africa, where she manages LMS operations, digital programme delivery, and reporting across the organisation's leadership development programmes. She writes on the operational realities of scaling EdTech across Africa, drawing on frontline data from LEAP Africa's learning platforms.