

## THE ROLE OF CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION IN PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates the critical role of Clinical Legal Education (CLE) in promoting social justice in Nigeria, focusing on the interplay between institutional frameworks, existing challenges, and potential opportunities for reform. It begins by establishing the theoretical underpinnings of CLE and its relevance to social justice, emphasizing how practical legal training can empower law students to address societal inequities. The analysis identifies key institutional frameworks that influence the effectiveness of CLE, including law schools, legal aid organizations, and government policies. Challenges such as limited resources, inadequate faculty training, and societal misconceptions about legal education significantly impede the progress of CLE initiatives. Through a comparative analysis of successful models both within and outside Nigeria, the paper highlights promising opportunities for reform that can enhance the delivery of CLE. By fostering partnerships between law schools and communities, integrating experiential learning into the curriculum, and advocating for supportive policies, CLE can serve as a powerful tool for social change. Ultimately, this research underscores the necessity for a concerted effort to strengthen CLE programs in Nigeria, which is*

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*essential for advancing social justice and building a more equitable legal system that serves all citizens.*

**Keywords:** Clinical Legal Education; Social Justice; Institutional Frameworks; Legal Education Challenges; Legal Aid

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Legal education in Nigeria has long lived in two separate worlds: the theoretical and the practical. For decades, law students sat in classrooms, memorized cases, parsed statutes, and regurgitated black-letter law for exams. They emerged from universities with their heads full of doctrine but with hands empty of real-world skills. A graduate could quote sections of the Constitution, recite landmark judgments, and wax lyrical about common law principles but hand them a client interview or a draft pleading, and you'd see panic, hesitation, and inexperience. It is in this gap, stark and glaring, that Clinical Legal Education or CLE, as it is more commonly known finds its purpose. CLE is not a gimmick, not a side hustle in law education. It is the bridge. The lifeline connecting the ivory tower to the courtroom, the seminar room to the streets, the theory of law to the practice of justice.<sup>1</sup>

Nigeria's legal landscape is riddled with contradictions. On paper, the Constitution promises access to justice, equality before the law, and the protection of fundamental rights. The Legal Education Act and accompanying regulatory frameworks set out the machinery to train competent lawyers. Institutions like the Council of Legal Education, the National Universities Commission, and the Nigerian Bar Association exist to monitor, accredit, and guide.<sup>2</sup> Yet, on the ground, justice often feels like a distant mirage for the ordinary Nigerian. Courts are

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<sup>1</sup> Bangbose O., Access To Justice Through Clinical Legal Education: A Way Forward For Good Governance And Development. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 15(2), 378-396.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

congested, legal fees are prohibitive, and communities remain largely unaware of their legal rights. How does a society expect its citizens to trust a legal system that is theoretically sound but practically distant? This is the context in which CLE emerges as not just a pedagogical tool but a social necessity.<sup>3</sup>

CLE transforms legal education from a spectator sport into a participatory one. Students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge; they become actors, decision-makers, and problem-solvers. They interview clients, draft pleadings, negotiate settlements, and even appear in court under supervision. They engage with real people facing real problems land disputes, tenancy issues, labor conflicts, family law matters. In doing so, CLE does more than teach law; it teaches responsibility, ethics, and social consciousness. Students see firsthand that law is not a series of abstract rules but a tool that can either empower the powerless or leave them stranded.<sup>4</sup>

What is striking about CLE in Nigeria is the ecosystem it has built. It is not just the universities and law schools; it is the NGOs, the professional associations, and the international networks that breathe life into the system. The Network of University Legal Aid Institutions (NULAI), for instance, emerged in 2003 with the audacious goal of reshaping legal education. Not by words alone, but by action. NULAI set up law clinics across the country, turning theory into practice. Through these clinics, students gain hands-on experience while communities gain access to free legal services. The Public and Private Development Centre (PPDC) has stepped in to consolidate these clinics and provide legal aid to indigent inmates in custodial centers. International bodies like the Global Alliance for Justice Education (GAJE) and the International Bar

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<sup>3</sup> Arimoro A. E., *Clinical Legal Education: Vision And Strategy For Start-Up Clinics In Nigeria*. *Int'l J. Clinical Legal Educ.*, 26, 132, (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Amah E. I., *Toward A Holistic Reform Of Legal Education In Nigeria*. *IRLJ*, 2, 102 (2020).

Association (IBA) provide frameworks, training, and networks that expose Nigerian students to global best practices.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the system is far from perfect. There are cracks, and they are visible. Funding is precarious. Some law clinics are little more than aspirational names on a university brochure, lacking staff, resources, and consistent supervision. Some universities treat CLE as an elective instead of a core requirement, leaving students to opt in or out of crucial practical training. The challenges are structural, financial, and cultural. Some faculty members resist change, clinging to the old lecture-and-exam model, while others lack the expertise to supervise practical legal work. Meanwhile, the demand for legal services among the marginalized grows unchecked. The result is a system that holds potential but struggles with execution.<sup>6</sup>

This article seeks to map the landscape of CLE in Nigeria. It will examine the legal and regulatory frameworks, the role of universities and law clinics, the impact of NGOs and professional associations, and the global influences shaping CLE practices. Finally, it will assess the challenges, opportunities, and the way forward. The purpose is not just descriptive; it is analytical, critical, and, at times, prescriptive. The goal is to illuminate both the promise and the pitfalls of CLE, offering insights into how Nigeria can cultivate a legal education system that produces lawyers who are not only competent in law but committed to justice.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Antia, D., Arguments Against The Non-Justiciable Status Of Chapter Ii Of The Constitution Of The Federal Republic Of Nigeria, 1999 As Amended, Faculty Of Law Journal, Topfaith University, Mkpatak (2024).

<sup>7</sup> Byron, I. P. (2014). The Relationship Between Social Justice And Clinical Legal Education: A Case Study Of The Women's Law Clinic, Faculty Of Law, University Of Ibadan, Nigeria. *Int'l J. Clinical Legal Educ.*, 20, 563

Because make no mistake: law is not just a career. It is a profession that carries the weight of society's trust. If Nigeria's institutions are weak, if access to justice is uneven, if the law remains a distant abstraction, the consequences are real. CLE is one of the few mechanisms designed to correct that. It is where students learn that behind every statute is a human life, behind every case is a community, and behind every judgment is an opportunity to affirm justice. In a country that oscillates between promise and paralysis, CLE offers a blueprint for how legal education can contribute meaningfully to societal transformation.

## **2. LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN NIGERIA**

Legal education does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped, constrained, and guided by the frameworks set in law and policy. In Nigeria, Clinical Legal Education (CLE) operates at the intersection of constitutional guarantees, legislative mandates, and institutional directives. The architecture is complex, multi-layered, and, at times, contradictory but it is this very complexity that defines the Nigerian legal education ecosystem. To understand how CLE functions, one must start at the top: the 1999 Constitution, the supreme law of the land.<sup>8</sup>

The Constitution guarantees access to justice as a fundamental right. Sections 36 to 46, among others, enshrine the rights to a fair hearing, legal representation, and protection of fundamental human rights. These provisions are not aspirational; they are legally enforceable mandates that set a baseline expectation for every citizen, regardless of status, income, or location. Yet, as anyone navigating Nigeria's legal corridors will tell you, access is easier to promise than to deliver. Court dockets

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<sup>8</sup> Byron, I. P., *The Relationship Between Social Justice And Clinical Legal Education: A Case Study Of The Women's Law Clinic, Faculty Of Law, University Of Ibadan, Nigeria*. *Int'l J. Clinical Legal Educ.*, 20, 563, (2014).

are backlogged, lawyers are concentrated in urban centers, and legal literacy among the populace is shockingly low. CLE, in this context, is not just pedagogical it is remedial. It plugs the gap between constitutional promise and lived reality, turning law students into front-line agents of justice.<sup>9</sup>

The Legal Education Act 2011 serves as the statutory backbone for professional legal training in Nigeria. The Act gives life to the Council of Legal Education (CLE), empowering it to oversee, regulate, and guide the education of aspiring lawyers. The CLE is the bridge between academic legal education and the practical realities of law. Without it, law graduates would be equipped with knowledge but bereft of skills, ethical grounding, or professional awareness. The Act sets standards for vocational training at the Nigerian Law School, ensuring that law graduates receive hands-on instruction in areas such as drafting, advocacy, negotiation, and client counselling. These are not luxuries they are necessities. For a country where legal disputes often involve complex statutory and customary dimensions, practical competency is non-negotiable.<sup>10</sup>

Complementing the Legal Education Act is the National Universities Commission (NUC), the body responsible for regulating tertiary education in Nigeria. The NUC's Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) for law programmes emphasize the importance of integrating practical training into university curricula. These standards encourage the establishment of law clinics, the use of simulations, and other experiential learning methodologies. The NUC recognizes that theoretical mastery without practical application is incomplete a recognition that aligns perfectly with the goals of CLE. Its guidelines

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Walsh, Bruce Lasky, Wendy Morrish, Nada Chaiyajit, (2012), Strengthening Access To Justice Through Clinical Legal Education (CLE), Transforming Government: People, Process And Policy, Vol. 6 Iss: 4 Pp. 380 – 391

are not mere bureaucratic formalities; they are intended to ensure that every law graduate emerges from university with not just knowledge, but practical competence and social responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

The regulatory ecosystem further extends to professional associations, chief among them the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA). The NBA wields influence not through statute but through professional authority. Its Institute of Continuing Legal Education (ICLE) operates the Mandatory Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) programme, ensuring that lawyers remain practice-ready throughout their careers. By embedding CLE principles within the MCLE framework, the NBA bridges the gap between initial professional training and lifelong competency. Beyond training, the NBA is an advocate for curricular reform, lobbying for the integration of CLE in law faculties and law schools, and encouraging collaboration between universities, NGOs, and government agencies. It is the NBA's belief that experiential learning should not end at graduation; it should evolve into a career-long commitment to justice and social responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the framework is not without its flaws. Multiple institutions operate in overlapping spaces, creating ambiguity and sometimes bureaucratic gridlock. The CLE, NUC, and NBA all have stakes in regulating, accrediting, and supervising legal education—but the lines of authority are not always clear. A law clinic might be accredited by a university, evaluated by the NUC, and simultaneously monitored by the Council of Legal Education, leading to duplication, confusion, or, worse, neglect. Systematic evaluation of clinical programs is uneven, and standards for practical legal education are not always enforced consistently. In

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Dada J.A., Human Rights Protection In Nigeria: The Past, The Present And Goals For Role Actors For The Future, *Journal Of Law, Policy And Globalization* 14 (2013): 1-13.

practice, the regulatory framework offers promise but demands careful navigation by educators, students, and policymakers alike.

International organizations also form part of the regulatory and developmental ecosystem for CLE in Nigeria. GAJE (Global Alliance for Justice Education) and the International Bar Association (IBA), for instance, provide guidance, training, and comparative frameworks that inform local practices. Their interventions are not legally binding, but they are influential, providing benchmarks for curriculum design, faculty development, and the ethical training of students. These global networks ensure that Nigeria's CLE programs are not isolated experiments but part of a broader, international movement towards justice-focused legal education.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this elaborate architecture, the real test lies in implementation. The law provides the skeleton; institutions provide the muscles; but the citizens the students, the clients, the communities—experience the system in practice. In many cases, law clinics operate under-resourced, under-supervised, and under-recognized, highlighting the gap between formal frameworks and on-the-ground reality. It is here that NGOs, law faculties, and professional associations must step in to operationalize the ideals embedded in the constitution, statutes, and institutional guidelines.

In sum, Nigeria's legal and regulatory framework for CLE is robust on paper, offering constitutional guarantees, statutory backing, and institutional oversight. It establishes the expectations for legal education, ethical practice, and access to justice. But like many other Nigerian institutions, its strength lies less in the documents themselves than in the degree to which stakeholders can translate rules into reality.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim A. L., Ibrahim Z. O., & Ibrahim, M. S., Repositioning The National Human Rights Commission For Advancing The Promotion, Protection And Enforcement Of Human Rights And Attainment Of Socio-Economic Development In Nigeria. *Journal Of Political Discourse*, 1(4), 75-86, (2023).

CLE is where the promise meets practice, and the effectiveness of this framework is measured not just in compliance but in the skills of law graduates and the access to justice experienced by ordinary Nigerians.

### **3. UNIVERSITIES, LAW FACULTIES, AND LAW CLINICS**

Universities are supposed to be temples of knowledge, but in Nigeria, they are also arenas where the theory of law meets the brutal reality of society. Law faculties form the bedrock of legal education, yet for decades, they were focused almost exclusively on lecture halls, dusty textbooks, and examinations that measured memory more than skill. Clinical Legal Education emerged as a response to this deficiency, a recognition that law is not learned in abstraction but in action. Law clinics within universities provide that action, that messy, hands-on engagement with real clients, real cases, and real consequences.

The Network of University Legal Aid Institutions, NULAI, is the engine behind much of this transformation. Since 2003, NULAI has championed the creation and operation of law clinics across Nigerian universities, insisting that legal education must have a public service dimension. Through NULAI's interventions, students move beyond theoretical knowledge to participate in interviewing clients, drafting legal documents, conducting research, and engaging in advocacy. These experiences are invaluable, particularly in a country where access to justice is uneven and many Nigerians cannot afford legal representation. Law clinics serve the dual purpose of educating students and providing legal services to communities that would otherwise be left out of the justice system.<sup>14</sup>

Take, for example, the University of Abuja Law Clinic. Here, students handle live-client cases under supervision, learning the weight of

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<sup>14</sup> Igwenyi, B. O., Amah, E. I., & Nweze, C. C., A Critical Examination Of The Challenges To Ethical Judiciary In Nigeria. *International Journal Of Comparative Law And Legal Philosophy (IJOCLLEP)*, 6(1), (2024).

responsibility that comes with representing another human being. They provide legal advice, conduct community outreach, and represent indigent clients in court. Every interaction is a lesson not just in law but in ethics, communication, and social accountability. These students are trained to see law as a tool for justice, not merely as a subject to be passed on an exam paper. They witness firsthand how legal rules intersect with societal realities, and they learn that every decision has human consequences.<sup>15</sup>

University law clinics do not operate in isolation. They collaborate with NGOs, government agencies, and professional associations, expanding their reach and deepening their impact. Projects like the Young Persons Peace Club Training, implemented by the University of Abuja Law Clinic in partnership with NULAI, demonstrate how clinics can extend beyond conventional legal services to address societal problems such as conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This is experiential learning in its most holistic form, producing graduates who are legally competent, socially aware, and ethically grounded.<sup>16</sup>

The Nigerian Law School has also integrated law clinics into its campuses. These clinics emerged in the early 2000s as a response to the limitations of purely classroom-based instruction. Law students at the Nigerian Law School are exposed to client interviewing, advocacy, negotiation, and courtroom simulation, under the supervision of seasoned faculty. This supervised immersion prepares students for the practical realities of legal practice in a jurisdiction marked by complexity, from statutory law to customary norms. Students learn that law is not an abstract set of rules but a living instrument that affects lives, communities, and the distribution of power in society.

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<sup>15</sup> John, Oludayo, Clinical Legal Education In Nigeria: Envisioning The Future. *Australian Journal of Clinical Education*. 10. 2-15. 10.53300/001c.22197, (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

Law clinics at the Nigerian Law School also perform a crucial social function. They provide legal aid to marginalized populations, often handling cases that would never reach the formal courts due to financial constraints. Through these clinics, law students see the tangible impact of their work. They witness how pro bono legal services can empower communities, protect rights, and sometimes change the course of an individual's life. Students also learn to navigate the practical limitations of the justice system, from bureaucratic inefficiencies to resource constraints, and they develop problem-solving skills that no lecture could teach.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of university and law school clinics is not uniform, however. Some campuses have fully embraced Clinical Legal Education, embedding it as a mandatory component of the curriculum, while others treat it as an elective. This uneven adoption affects the quality of practical training that students receive and, by extension, the competence of graduates entering the profession. Funding remains a perennial issue. Many clinics rely on short-term grants, volunteer supervision, and sporadic support from NGOs, which limits the range of services they can offer. Faculty resistance, outdated infrastructure, and limited administrative support further hinder the full realization of CLE's potential.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these challenges, law clinics remain the frontline of experiential learning in Nigerian legal education. They are laboratories where the law is tested against reality, where students learn the ethical and

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<sup>17</sup> Nlerum S. Okogbule, "Access to Justice and Human Rights Protection in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects," *International Journal Of Human Rights* 3, No. 3 (2013): 94-113.

<sup>18</sup> Odigie-Emmanuel, Omoyemen & Dahiya, Shiksha, The Role of Legal Clinics In Promoting Human Rights: The Experience of Nigeria Law School Yenagoa Law Clinic And The Legal Support And Care Centre At Gd Goenka University School Of Law Gurgaon India. *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education*. 30. 4-56, (2023).

practical dimensions of practice, and where the promise of access to justice is tangibly delivered. The collaboration between universities, NGOs, and professional bodies creates an ecosystem that nurtures practice-ready lawyers who are socially conscious and professionally competent. These clinics are not just educational tools; they are instruments of social change, channels through which the ideals of justice, fairness, and equity reach communities that might otherwise be excluded from the legal system.

Universities and law clinics, therefore, occupy a unique position. They are at once classrooms and courts, training grounds and social laboratories, sites of intellectual growth and civic responsibility. Through the integration of CLE, Nigerian legal education evolves from a passive accumulation of knowledge to an active engagement with society. The students trained in these clinics carry with them not only legal competence but also a sense of moral duty, a commitment to public service, and an understanding of the transformative power of law.

#### **4. ROLE OF NGOS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION**

In Nigeria, legal education does not operate in a vacuum. Universities and law schools alone cannot shoulder the burden of bridging the yawning gap between theory and practice. That responsibility is shared by non-governmental organizations and international bodies, which have emerged as indispensable allies in the advancement of Clinical Legal Education. They bring resources, expertise, global perspectives, and an unwavering focus on access to justice, all of which amplify the impact of law clinics and experiential learning programs across the country.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ogilvy, J. P. (2009). Celebrating Clepr's 40th Anniversary: The Early Development Of Clinical Legal Education And Legal Ethics Instruction In Us Law Schools. *Clinical L. Rev.*, 16, 1.

Non-governmental organizations have been central to this transformation. They are the quiet architects behind the rise of practical legal training in Nigeria. Organizations like the Network of University Legal Aid Institutions, NULAI, and the Public and Private Development Centre, PPDC, have carved out spaces where students can encounter the law as it lives and breathes in society. NULAI, since its inception in 2003, has been more than an NGO; it has been a movement. By supporting the establishment of law clinics, offering technical assistance, training faculty and supervisors, and facilitating partnerships, NULAI has transformed abstract classroom theory into concrete practice. Law students working in these clinics are not merely learning the law; they are learning responsibility, empathy, and the social dimensions of justice.<sup>20</sup>

The PPDC complements this work by targeting systemic gaps in legal access<sup>21</sup>. In Nasarawa State, for example, its initiatives consolidate law clinics and extend their reach to indigent inmates in custodial centers. Here, students do more than observe; they provide legal representation and advocacy to individuals who often have no voice<sup>22</sup>. The PPDC's programs demonstrate that experiential legal education is inseparable from social impact. By engaging with vulnerable populations, students are trained to see beyond statutes and codes they are trained to see people. This dual approach educating students while serving the marginalized is the hallmark of effective CLE and the reason NGOs are indispensable partners.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Agwu S.K., Dibiaezue U. & Chijioke N., Pathways to Reforming Pre-Trial Detention in Nigeria: PPDC's Access to Justice Contributions, *Kampala International University Law Journal* (KIULJ) [2023] Vol. 5, Issue II

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ojukwu E., Ojukwu C.N., and Ehighelua I., Law Clinics in Nigerian Universities: Lessons from the Nigerian Experience," *Asian Journal of Legal Education* 3, No. 2 (2016): 160-176.

International organizations play a similarly transformative role. The Global Alliance for Justice Education, GAJE, has positioned itself as a hub for knowledge-sharing, networking, and innovation in CLE. By sponsoring conferences, workshops, and training, GAJE connects Nigerian educators and practitioners with global best practices. Law faculty members and clinic supervisors gain exposure to emerging methodologies, interdisciplinary approaches, and cutting-edge teaching techniques. This global perspective is not merely academic; it directly informs how clinics operate in Nigeria, influencing everything from case management to ethical frameworks. GAJE ensures that Clinical Legal Education is not a localized experiment but a movement that aligns with international standards while remaining responsive to local realities.<sup>24</sup>

The International Bar Association, IBA, has also contributed to reshaping Nigerian CLE. Through its committees and programs, the IBA has advocated for the integration of practical skills and experiential learning into Nigerian law curricula. It provides technical support for law clinics, focusing on human rights, access to justice, and professional ethics. Faculty training, workshops, and collaborative programs facilitated by the IBA help ensure that CLE initiatives are not only educationally robust but also socially relevant. By fostering networks between Nigerian institutions and international counterparts, the IBA amplifies the reach and quality of CLE, allowing Nigerian law students to benefit from lessons learned in other jurisdictions while adapting them to the local context.<sup>25</sup>

These NGOs and international organizations share a common philosophy: that law is a tool for social change and that training lawyers

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<sup>24</sup> Ojukwu Ernest, & Yusuf Mahmud (2022). Mapping the Role of Law Clinics Under the Legal Aid Act of Nigeria. *International Review of Law*, 11(3).

<sup>25</sup> Olanike S. Adelokun-Odewale, Role of Clinical Legal Education in Social Justice in Nigeria, *Asian Journal of Legal Education* (1) 88–98 (2017)

must go hand in hand with fostering justice. Their programs ensure that law clinics remain sustainable and effective, addressing not only the educational needs of students but also the legal needs of society's most vulnerable. By providing funding, expertise, and technical support, these bodies counterbalance the chronic underfunding and resource constraints faced by many Nigerian institutions. They also introduce accountability mechanisms, performance benchmarks, and innovative approaches that might otherwise remain absent in a system dominated by theoretical instruction.<sup>26</sup>

The collaboration between Nigerian law faculties, NGOs, and international organizations has produced tangible outcomes. Students gain hands-on experience in client interviewing, legal drafting, research, and courtroom advocacy. Communities gain access to pro bono legal services, often for cases that would otherwise go unaddressed. Faculty members benefit from capacity-building programs that improve supervision, teaching methodologies, and the overall effectiveness of CLE. These interactions create an ecosystem where knowledge, skills, and social responsibility reinforce each other, producing lawyers who are competent, ethical, and socially conscious.<sup>27</sup>

Challenges remain, of course. Dependence on external funding makes some programs precarious. Resistance from traditional faculty, disparities in institutional resources, and varying levels of infrastructure mean that CLE is not uniformly implemented across the country. Yet, NGOs and international organizations continue to innovate, advocating for policy reforms, capacity-building, and sustainable financing models to address these gaps. They work to ensure that Clinical Legal Education

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Omaka C. A., Agwu S. K., Et Al, Administration Of Criminal Justice Act 2015: Its Relevance To The Law Clinics In Nigeria, *Journal Of Commonwealth Law And Legal Education*, available at <https://law-school.open.ac.uk/overview/journal-commonwealth-law-and-legal-education/adminstration-criminal-justice-act-2015-its> accessed last on 16th October 2025

in Nigeria is more than a temporary experiment—it is a permanent, integral part of legal education.

In essence, NGOs and international organizations are the lifeblood of CLE in Nigeria. They provide the scaffolding upon which universities and law schools can construct programs that are both practically rigorous and socially meaningful. Without them, law clinics would struggle to function at scale; without them, students would graduate with impressive theoretical knowledge but insufficient practical skill. By bridging the gap between education and justice, these organizations ensure that Nigerian legal education does not just produce lawyers but produces agents of social change. They remind the legal profession that competence without conscience is insufficient, and that access to justice is not a luxury but a societal imperative.<sup>28</sup>

#### **5. REGULATORY BODIES AND PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION**

In Nigeria, legal education is like a three-legged stool. One leg is the universities, where theory is taught. Another leg is the law clinics and experiential programs, where theory meets practice. The third leg, often overlooked but equally critical, is the regulatory framework and professional bodies that ensure standards, consistency, and accountability. Without these bodies, even the best clinics risk becoming islands of practice without coordination, oversight, or sustainability. Enter the National Universities Commission, the Council of Legal Education, and the Nigerian Bar Association pillars that not only regulate but shape the very soul of Clinical Legal Education in Nigeria.

The National Universities Commission, or NUC, wears multiple hats. It is the chief regulator of university education, setting the minimum academic standards for all programmes, including law. In 1989, it began

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid

drafting benchmarks that would later evolve into the Nigerian Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) for law programs. The BMAS does more than prescribe hours and syllabi; it advocates for practical legal training as a necessary complement to theoretical knowledge. By emphasizing Clinical Legal Education within these standards, the NUC seeks to produce graduates who are not just familiar with statutes and case law but who can also navigate the intricacies of client interaction, courtroom procedure, and community-based legal issues.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, the NUC's work is not merely administrative. It represents a vision: that law graduates should leave the university armed not only with knowledge but with competence, ethics, and a sense of social responsibility. The guidelines encourage the establishment of law clinics, integration of practical exercises, and engagement with real-life legal scenarios. They emphasize reflective learning, client counseling, and access-to-justice initiatives, thereby transforming law programs from ivory-tower exercises into socially responsive education. But implementation remains uneven. Some universities embrace the vision fully, embedding CLE into core curricula; others struggle due to limited funding, inadequate faculty expertise, or institutional inertia. The NUC can legislate standards, but it cannot single-handedly guarantee adherence, and this is where collaboration with professional bodies and NGOs becomes crucial.<sup>30</sup>

The Council of Legal Education plays an equally pivotal role, but its focus is on the transition from university graduate to practicing lawyer. It runs the Nigerian Law School, which is not a mere finishing school

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<sup>29</sup> Omidoyin, T. J., & Oniyinde, O., Law Clinics And Access To Justice For Pretrial Detainees In Nigeria. *Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal Of International Law And Jurisprudence*, 10(1), 101-108 (2019).

<sup>30</sup> Prasad, M. R. K. Institutionalizing A Social Justice Mission For Clinical Legal Education: Cross-National Currents From India And The United States. *Nyls Clinical Research Institute Paper*, (05/06), 6, (2005).

but a crucible where academic theory is forged into practical skill. Here, students are immersed in vocational training that encompasses legal drafting, advocacy, client counseling, and negotiation. Classroom lectures give way to simulated court proceedings and supervised live-client interactions. The Council ensures that every law graduate emerging from the Law School meets minimum professional competencies and is equipped to handle the ethical and procedural demands of practice.<sup>31</sup>

What distinguishes the Council of Legal Education is its dual commitment: professional competence and social responsibility. By insisting on law clinics and practical exercises, the Council reinforces the connection between law and society. Graduates learn that the law is not merely a tool for personal advancement but a mechanism for justice, particularly for those without resources. Its accreditation criteria for law faculties require adherence to experiential learning standards, ensuring that universities complement their theoretical instruction with practical opportunities. Challenges remain, particularly in the form of inconsistent adoption of CLE across institutions, but the Council's oversight ensures that standards exist, and there is a structure in place for continuous improvement.<sup>32</sup>

The Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), meanwhile, serves as the professional conscience of the system. While the NUC sets academic benchmarks and the Council of Legal Education ensures vocational readiness, the NBA ensures lifelong adherence to competence and ethics. Through its Institute of Continuing Legal Education (ICLE), the NBA administers the Mandatory Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) programme, compelling lawyers to stay abreast of new developments,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Rhoda Adeola, "The National Human Rights Commission and The Protection Of Economic And Social Rights In Nigeria: Mandate, Challenges And Prospects," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 19, No. 1 (2019): 337-364.

technologies, and best practices throughout their careers. This commitment extends the philosophy of CLE beyond the classroom, ensuring that experiential learning becomes a lifelong pursuit rather than a one-time exercise.<sup>33</sup>

The NBA also plays an active role in policy advocacy, pushing for reforms that embed CLE into law school curricula and accreditation requirements. It engages with universities, NGOs, and international partners to foster collaborations, fund law clinics, and promote pro bono work. By championing access to justice and professional ethics, the NBA reinforces the social dimensions of legal training. Law students exposed to NBA-supported clinics learn that being a lawyer is not just about winning cases but about fairness, equity, and societal responsibility.<sup>34</sup>

Collectively, these bodies form a regulatory ecosystem that is comprehensive yet complex. They set standards, monitor compliance, provide technical support, and advocate for reforms. Their influence spans every stage of legal education, from theoretical instruction in universities to vocational training at the Law School and ongoing professional development through the NBA. Yet, the system is not without flaws. Overlapping jurisdictions, disparities in institutional capacity, and uneven implementation of CLE standards highlight the need for stronger coordination and targeted support for under-resourced institutions.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Udemezue Sylvester and Ngige Emeka, *Navigating The Future Of Legal Education In Contemporary Nigeria: Effective Strategies For Addressing Current Challenges And Proposals For Reforms* (December 01, 2024). Available At Ssrn: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5040651> Or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5040651>

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, R. J. *Clinical Legal Education In Africa*. In *The Global Evolution Of Clinical Legal Education: More Than A Method* (Pp. 205–232). Chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2017).

Even so, the achievements are undeniable. The collaborative efforts of the NUC, Council of Legal Education, and NBA have transformed Nigerian legal education from a purely academic pursuit into a multifaceted, socially responsive training process. Graduates emerge not just as lawyers but as practitioners who understand their role in society, equipped with practical skills, ethical awareness, and a commitment to justice. These regulatory bodies ensure that CLE is not an optional add-on but a core component of legal education, aligning Nigeria with global best practices while addressing the unique social and legal challenges of the country.<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, the regulatory and professional framework is the backbone of Clinical Legal Education in Nigeria. It is not flashy, it is not often celebrated, but without it, the entire system of practical legal training would crumble. The NUC, Council of Legal Education, and NBA ensure that standards exist, that practical training is delivered, and that law graduates understand the moral and professional responsibilities that accompany their legal knowledge. Together, they transform students into lawyers capable of navigating the legal landscape while advancing justice and social responsibility across Nigerian society.

## **6. CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THE FUTURE OF CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

Clinical Legal Education in Nigeria has made remarkable strides, yet the journey has been far from smooth. The framework exists, the regulatory bodies are in place, and the passion among students, academics, and NGOs is palpable. But as with everything in the Nigerian context, progress is constantly tested by the realities of resources, institutional weakness, and social complexity. CLE, for all its

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<sup>36</sup> Ziedan, S. E. K. The Role Of Civil Society Organizations In Achieving Social Protection For The Disabled. *Journal of Sociology*, 6(1), 56-63 (2018).

promise, sits at the intersection of ambition and limitation, innovation and constraint.

One of the most glaring challenges is funding. Law clinics, whether at universities or the Nigerian Law School, require resources physical space, staff salaries, transportation for outreach, technology for case management, and materials for training. Many clinics operate on shoestring budgets, relying heavily on short-term grants or volunteer supervision. NGOs like NULAI, PPDC, and international partners such as GAJE and the IBA have stepped in to fill some of the gaps, but dependency on external funding introduces instability. A sudden withdrawal or reduction in support can slow or even halt clinic operations, leaving both students and communities in limbo. The sustainability question looms large: how can CLE programs thrive when their lifeline is inconsistent? Addressing this requires not just more money but smarter funding strategies partnerships with government agencies, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and the creation of endowment funds specifically for law clinics.<sup>37</sup>

Closely tied to funding is the challenge of institutional capacity. Some universities and Nigerian Law School campuses boast well-equipped clinics with experienced faculty, but others struggle with outdated infrastructure, limited supervision, and insufficient integration of CLE into the core curriculum. This uneven capacity affects both the quality of student training and the accessibility of legal services for marginalized populations. Students at well-resourced clinics experience robust hands-on training, while their peers elsewhere might never see a live client or participate in courtroom advocacy until they join the profession. These disparities highlight a pressing need for technical

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<sup>37</sup> Chioma Unini, Status And Powers Of The Nigerian Bar Association (Nba) In The Nigerian Legal Profession, (Thenigerialawyer, January 5, 2023) <[https://thenigerialawyer.com/status-and-powers-of-the-nigerian-bar-association-nba-in-the-nigerian-legal-profession/#Google\\_Vignette](https://thenigerialawyer.com/status-and-powers-of-the-nigerian-bar-association-nba-in-the-nigerian-legal-profession/#Google_Vignette)>

assistance programs, faculty development, and standardized guidelines that ensure all law students, regardless of institution, benefit from experiential learning.<sup>38</sup>

Then there is the matter of cultural resistance within academia. CLE represents a departure from conventional lecture-based instruction. For some traditionalists, experiential learning is risky, time-consuming, or even unnecessary. There are concerns about student competency in handling live cases, ethical risks, or the additional workload on faculty. NGOs like NULAI and professional associations like the NBA have spent years demonstrating the value of CLE, showcasing case studies and success stories to persuade skeptics. Slowly, the tide is turning, but resistance persists, particularly in institutions where leadership is entrenched or faculty feel underprepared to supervise clinical programs effectively. Changing this mindset requires not only evidence of success but ongoing training, mentorship, and incentives for faculty who embrace clinical pedagogy.<sup>39</sup>

Beyond internal constraints, CLE faces systemic societal challenges. Access to justice in Nigeria remains elusive for many. Rural populations, indigent citizens, and vulnerable groups often have no means to engage lawyers or understand their rights. Law clinics attempt to fill that gap, but logistical barriers, insecurity, and socio-cultural dynamics limit their reach. Some communities may be unaware of legal aid services, while others distrust formal legal mechanisms. CLE programs, therefore, must navigate these complex realities while still providing meaningful student training. This dual mission—education

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> PPDC, PPDC Honoured For Pioneering Efforts In Access To Justice And Legal Education In Nasarawa State|Ppdc <<https://www.ppdc.org/ppdc-honoured-for-pioneering-efforts-in-access-to-justice-and-legal-education-in-nasarawa-state/>>

and social service can strain even the best-run clinics, requiring innovation, local partnerships, and sustained outreach strategies.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these hurdles, the opportunities for CLE in Nigeria are immense. The appetite for reform and practical training is strong among students, NGOs, and forward-thinking faculties. International collaborations offer a wealth of knowledge, mentorship, and resources. GAJE and the IBA have already introduced Nigerian institutions to global best practices in clinical pedagogy, access to justice, and experiential learning methodologies. Partnerships with these organizations have led to faculty training workshops, student exchanges, and the adoption of innovative practices such as simulation exercises, live-client representation, and technology-enhanced legal service delivery.<sup>41</sup>

Technology, in particular, represents a transformative opportunity. Case management software, online legal research tools, virtual court simulations, and digital client consultations could revolutionize CLE in Nigeria. Clinics can reach underserved communities without requiring physical travel, track cases efficiently, and provide students with skills that mirror modern legal practice. Digital platforms also enable collaboration across institutions and borders, connecting Nigerian law students with peers and mentors worldwide. The challenge is ensuring equitable access: clinics in well-funded urban universities are likely to benefit first, while rural or under-resourced campuses risk being left behind unless policy and funding interventions address the digital divide.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Redefining Legal Education With An Innovative Approach - American University Of Nigeria. (2024, May 16). <https://Aun.Edu.Ng/Index.Php/News-Events/News/Redefining-Legal-Education-With-An-Innovative-Approach>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Olanike S. Adedokun-Odeyemi, Role of Clinical Legal Education In Social Justice In Nigeria, *Asian Journal of Legal Education* (1) 88–98 (2017),

Another opportunity lies in institutional and regulatory reform. Greater coordination among the NUC, Council of Legal Education, and NBA could streamline CLE standards, reduce duplication, and clarify oversight responsibilities. Stronger monitoring mechanisms, incentives for compliance, and prescriptive guidelines for clinical programs would ensure that experiential learning is not optional but central to legal education. NGOs can facilitate this process by acting as intermediaries, providing technical assistance, and sharing lessons learned from successful programs.<sup>43</sup>

CLE also presents a societal opportunity beyond the classroom. Law clinics are more than training grounds they are vehicles for social justice. By providing legal aid to marginalized populations, students gain real-world experience while addressing systemic inequalities. Pro bono work, mobile legal aid initiatives, and community outreach programs allow law students to see firsthand the impact of law on society. This dual impact professional preparation and social service is precisely what makes CLE transformative. It produces lawyers who are not just skilled but socially conscious, aware that legal expertise is a tool for empowerment, equity, and change.

Looking forward, the future of CLE in Nigeria hinges on integration, sustainability, and innovation. Integration means embedding CLE into the mandatory curriculum at every law faculty and Nigerian Law School campus, ensuring every student participates in experiential learning. Sustainability requires funding solutions, institutional support, and faculty capacity development to maintain high-quality programs. Innovation involves adopting technology, modern teaching

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<sup>43</sup> Odigie-Emmanuel, Omoyemen & Dahiya, Shiksha, The Role Of Legal Clinics In Promoting Human Rights: The Experience Of Nigeria Law School Yenagoa Law Clinic And The Legal Support And Care Centre At Gd Goenka University School Of Law Gurgaon India. *International Journal Of Clinical Legal Education*. 30. 4-56. (2023).

methodologies, and interdisciplinary approaches to address evolving legal and societal challenges.<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately, CLE is a test of Nigeria's ability to build strong institutions around legal education. It demands collaboration, foresight, and commitment from universities, regulatory bodies, NGOs, and professional associations. Done right, it produces lawyers who are competent, ethical, and socially responsible. Done poorly, it risks producing graduates who are theoretically proficient but practically unprepared, leaving society underserved. The stakes are high, but the potential is higher. Nigerian legal education stands on the cusp of transformation, with CLE as the vehicle that can propel the system from theoretical instruction to practice-oriented excellence, ensuring that law graduates are not just participants in the legal system but active agents of justice and social change.<sup>45</sup>

The challenges of CLE funding, capacity, resistance, and systemic barriers are substantial but not insurmountable. Opportunities abound through technology, international partnerships, regulatory reform, and community engagement. The future of Clinical Legal Education in Nigeria will be defined by the ability of all stakeholders to work together, innovate, and commit to the dual goals of professional competence and social responsibility. For a country grappling with legal and social inequities, CLE is more than an educational approach; it is a moral imperative, a practical necessity, and a blueprint for producing lawyers who can shape a just and equitable society.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid

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