ABSTRACT

Since its introduction in 2017, Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy has significantly expanded access to secondary education. It has been widely recognised as a major social intervention to promote educational equity. However, existing empirical studies have largely focused on enrolment expansion and fiscal commitment, with limited analytical attention to implementation dynamics, stakeholder experiences, and the institutional conditions shaping policy outcomes. Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of why implementation challenges persist despite substantial government investment and how these challenges vary across sub-national contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining the implementation of the Free SHS policy through a stakeholder-centred analysis of educational quality and equity in selected Municipal and District Assemblies in Ghana's Ashanti Region.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretive research paradigm to capture the perspectives and lived experiences of key policy actors. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with thirty (30) key informants, including heads of senior high schools, municipal and district education directors, education officials, and parent representatives, complemented by two focus group discussions with students. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across key institutional roles within the policy implementation process. The data were analysed using thematic and content analyses to identify recurring patterns, explanatory mechanisms, and institutional dynamics that influence implementation outcomes.

The findings reveal that while the Free SHS policy has substantially improved access to secondary education and contributed to gender parity, its impact on educational quality and equity remains uneven across districts. Implementation challenges are not solely attributable to financial constraints but also arise from the interplay of fiscal limitations, infrastructural deficits, administrative capacity constraints, and weak coordination between central and local governance structures. Delays in the disbursement of funds, overcrowded classrooms, increased teacher workload, and student welfare concerns were found to affect learning conditions, particularly in resource-constrained districts, significantly. The analysis further demonstrates that limited engagement of key stakeholders, especially Parent-Teacher Associations and sub-national actors, weakens local ownership and affects the sustainability of policy implementation.

The study contributes to public policy implementation scholarship by extending implementation theory to the context of universal secondary education reforms in developing countries. It shows that policy outcomes cannot be explained solely by policy design or funding levels but are mediated by institutional capacity, stakeholder agency, and multi-level governance dynamics. By highlighting the role of institutional mediation in shaping implementation outcomes, the study advances theoretical understanding of policy implementation gaps in large-scale social interventions.

From a policy perspective, the study provides evidence-based insights for improving the implementation of Ghana's Free SHS policy. It underscores the need for predictable funding mechanisms, targeted infrastructure investment, strengthened stakeholder participation, and improved coordination between national and sub-national education authorities. Beyond Ghana, the findings offer relevant lessons for other low- and middle-income countries pursuing tuition-free secondary education as a strategy to expand access, promote equity, and strengthen human capital development.