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Digital Learning Inequality and the Right to Education: An Empirical Analysis of Access, Governance, and Social Justice

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Abstract

Digital learning has become an essential component of contemporary education, yet unequal access to digital technologies continues to challenge the realization of the right to education. This research adopts quantitative research paradigm and secondary data with empirical approach, by examining the relationships between digital learning access, educational governance, social justice aspects, and right to education. The method used was a cross-sectional analytical method and statistical analyses were carried out using Python computer. The associations between the study variables and the robustness of the empirical model was assessed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, multiple linear regression, and diagnostic tests. The indicators showed the right to education was the strongest predictor of access to digital learning while educational governance and social justice were the next two indicators in ranking. There were also significant positive effects to be found for internet penetration and public spending on education, while the GDP per capita and urbanization rate had no significant independent effect once the main explanatory variables had been controlled for. Overall, the model accounted for a significant amount of the variation in educational outcomes, underscoring the joint effects of technological accessibility, good governance, and fair educational policies. The study suggests the need for integrated policy interventions to reduce digital learning inequality, which aim to build digital infrastructure, institutional governance, and social justice to support inclusive, resilient, and equitable education systems that can ensure the right to education for all learners.

Keywords: Digital learning inequality, Right to education, Educational governance, Social justice, Digital learning access

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have significantly changed the world around us and education is no exception, resulting in changes in how teaching and learning and knowledge is shared and how it's delivered at all levels of education. The opportunities for learning, which are enabled by digital learning, using digital platforms, virtual classrooms, learning management systems and mobile technologies, have broadened the opportunities for learning outside of the classroom and enhanced lifelong learning potential. The shift towards digitally enabled learning has greatly accelerated during COVID-19, providing the evidence of how technology can maintain learning continuity and highlighting stark inequities in the capacity of learners to access and make use of digital resources (Vadlamannati et al., 2021). While digital learning is part of learning in the 21st century, its benefits are not equally distributed due to the lack of adequate internet access, technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and socioeconomic conditions.

Equitable access to digital learning is now part and parcel of the realization of the fundamental right to education, especially for education now increasingly relying on digital technologies (Ossiannilsson, 2021). In this era of digitalisation, in developing regions especially, the provision of reliable internet access is now considered to be a precondition for educational participation and not simply a technology service from a human rights point of view (Faturoti, 2022). Similarly, digital transformation has been identified as a powerful tool to promote social and epistemic justice in terms of enhanced opportunities for participation in teaching and learning as long as structural inequalities are addressed (Mhlongo and Dlamini, 2022). However, findings in unequal learning environments has indicated that the process of digital transformation has reinforced the socioeconomic inequities already present, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of a learning divide in the face of the fast paced technological advancement (Isaacs, 2020).

Although governments have been investing in digital education continuously, there is significant inequity in digital education between countries, regions, and population groups. Disadvantaged groups such as people in rural areas, low-income families, disadvantaged groups and under-resourced schools continue to face restricted access to digital devices, electricity, and technical support, as well as internet services. These inequities limit learners' ability to meaningfully engage in digital learning spaces and impacts efforts to ensure quality inclusive education. While various governments have launched digital education programs to combat the impact of the pandemic, the initiatives have had limited success in tackling education gaps due to poor infrastructure, unequal institutional capacity, and lack of financial investment (Matsieli and Mutula, 2024).

Concurrently, the challenges of equity, fairness and social justice have gained greater prominence in discussions about digital education due to the unequal access to learning technologies that disproportionately impacts vulnerable learners and exacerbates existing educational inequalities (Roshid et al., 2025). Other findings suggest that the expansion of technology is not enough to achieve equitable educational participation in rural communities or those where there are gaps in services, as digital transformation needs to be supported by infrastructure, accessibility to technology, institutional support, and digital competence (Aruleba and Jere, 2022). Furthermore, educational governance is one of the most key factors influencing the implementation of resources, funding mechanisms, and institutional policies, which consequently influence the realization of equity in education and minimizing digital learning inequalities (Sayed et al., 2020).

Interest in digital education and educational equity has grown significantly in the scholarly literature, but there is still a significant number of empirical gaps. Previous research has focused on one of these aspects separately, such as digital access, the adoption of educational technology, governance, or educational inequality, leaving fragmented evidence of the interconnections among these aspects (Gunawan, 2024). It is therefore difficult to draw coherent empirical conclusions on the complex interplay between access to digital learning, governance practices and social justice on the ability to realize the right to education in increasingly digital learning environments. Previous studies have highlighted that socially just digitalisation needs to go beyond mere technological expansion and involve in-depth reforms of institutions that have the power to marginalize and disadvantage children and adolescents in education (Dlamini, 2022).

Comparative legal scholarship has also found that governance arrangements can have a crucial impact on the effect of digital learning systems on educational inclusion or institutional inequality, but there has been less empirical research that combine governance and educational rights (Yani, 2026). Studies exploring digital learning barriers also showed that disparities in access, engagement, and participation in digital learning persist across the vast and growing array of digital education systems, necessitating the need for more comprehensive empirical frameworks that explore these

interrelated barriers (Bi and Ishak, 2025). Moreover, while governance arrangements and legal frameworks have been documented to have an impact on social justice outcomes for marginalised populations, recent interdisciplinary evidence suggests that governance, legal and technological development work together to influence social justice outcomes, necessitating integrated empirical analyses that take these factors into account (Alnakshabandi et al., 2026).

In this context, the present study proposes a comprehensive empirical study based on the intersection of: access to digital learning, educational governance, and social justice in the implementation of the right to education. The study is intended to analyze the dimensions from a multi-faceted perspective, looking at them simultaneously, so as to gain a multi-faceted understanding of the structural factors that lead to digital learning inequality and educational inclusion. The outcomes will help to build up a solid body of empirical evidence on digital education and provide inputs for improved governance, and the creation of more inclusive and effective digital education policies, targeted to various groups of learners. The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the relationship between digital learning access and the realization of the right to education.
- To evaluate the influence of educational governance on digital learning inequality.
- To assess the contribution of social justice to equitable educational opportunities.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study used a quantitative research design to explore the relationships between the access to digital learning, education governance, social justice and the realization of the right to education. The cross-sectional analytical method was used to analyze the relationship between the variables selected, based on observations taken in the same period. For the study, secondary data were only used from publicly accessible and internationally well-known databases, which enabled a comprehensive assessment of digital learning inequality in various national contexts. The study was conducted with a deductive research approach, with theoretical frameworks of digital inequality, educational governance, and social justice as the basis for the empirical framework and statistical analysis. In quantitative design, the analysis was objective and systematic for determining the strength and direction of relationships between the study variables, and to provide evidence to form policies for informed decisions.

2.2 Data Source

Secondary data from internationally recognized databases of educational data, social and economic development, and digital development were used. A set of indicators for digital learning access, participation in education, quality of educational governance, internet access, public education expenditure, urbanisation and economic development were combined to create the analytical dataset. To achieve data consistency and analytical reliability, countries with incomplete observations or with significant amount of missing observations in the selected variables were omitted. The data set was first checked for duplication, inconsistencies and missing data before statistical analysis. All data were preprocessed to improve the quality, accuracy, and uniformity of the final data set, including standardization, numerical indicator formatting, and data validation.

2.3 Variable Measurement

The right to education, captured in indicators of educational participation and access to learning opportunities, was the dependent variable in this study. Digital learning access, educational governance and social justice were included as independent variables. Digital learning access reflected the access to digital infrastructure and to technological resources for the participation in online education. The institutional effectiveness, policy implementation, and administrative capacity to support equitable digital education were reflected in educational governance. The concept of social justice meant fairness and equality of educational opportunities in various population groups. In order to reduce the possible confounding effects, four variables of control were added to the empirical model: GDP per capita, the penetration rate of the Internet, public expenditure on education and the rate of urbanization, because they are widely recognised as significant factors of educational development and digital inclusion.

2.4 Data Analysis

Python was used for all statistical analyses. The data was preprocessed and managed to ensure consistency and uniformity in the data, and to remove any missing values. Means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values were computed to summarize the characteristics and distribution of the study variables. A Pearson correlation analysis was then used to explore the direction and magnitude of relationships between variables and to identify possible associations before modelling the relationships using regression.

Multiple linear regression was then conducted to identify the impact of the digital learning access, education governance and social justice on the realization of the right to education and controlling for GDP per capita, internet penetration rate, public expenditure on education, and urbanization rate. Diagnostic methods used to test the model assumptions were the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which was used to detect multicollinearity, the Shapiro–Wilk test to check the normality of the residuals and the Breusch–Pagan test to check the heteroscedasticity. Finally, robustness analysis was carried out using different regression specifications, to ensure the consistency and stability of the estimated coefficients. All inferential analyses were made at the 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$).

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

The mean score for Digital Learning Access was 3.72 ± 0.37 , reflecting a relatively high level of access for the majority of observations to digital learning resources. The means of Educational Governance and Social Justice were 3.32 ± 0.47 and 3.38 ± 0.36 , respectively, indicating moderate-to-high levels of perceptions of effectiveness of governance and equity in education. The mean of the dependent variable Right to Education was 3.64 ± 0.34 which indicated that generally, education access was good among the sampled observations (Table 1). The average GDP per capita was 23,022.39, and Internet Penetration averaged 72.11% indicating a relatively high level of digital connectivity. The Public Education Expenditure averaged 4.76% of GDP and the mean Urbanization Rate was 66.43%. The descriptive results showed that there was adequate variation among the study variables for further correlation and regression analysis to be performed.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Digital Learning Access	3.72	0.37	2.65	4.89
Educational Governance	3.32	0.47	2.20	4.92
Social Justice	3.38	0.36	2.37	4.62
GDP per Capita	23,022.39	11,528.04	800.00	61,963.23
Internet Penetration (%)	72.11	10.70	38.91	99.00
Public Education Expenditure (% GDP)	4.76	0.98	2.00	7.55
Urbanization Rate (%)	66.43	10.36	34.15	98.00
Right to Education	3.64	0.34	2.72	4.60

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Digital Learning Access was moderately positively associated with Educational Governance ($r = 0.539$) and weakly to moderately positively associated with Social Justice ($r = 0.265$). Educational Governance was also positively correlated with GDP per Capita ($r = 0.576$), indicating that countries with a more robust educational governance had a higher level of economic capacity (Table 2). GDP per Capita was positively correlated with Digital Learning Access ($r = 0.428$), suggesting that the more developed the economy is, the more this will contribute to better access to digital learning resources. The correlation results of the explanatory variables indicate positive interrelationships between the variables and that the relationship between the variables was not strong enough to imply that the variables were fully redundant with each other (Figure 1). The subsequent multiple regression analysis was justified by these results.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	DLA	EG	SJ	GDP
Digital Learning Access (DLA)	1.000	0.539	0.265	0.428
Educational Governance (EG)	0.539	1.000	0.401	0.576
Social Justice (SJ)	0.265	0.401	1.000	0.434
GDP per Capita	0.428	0.576	0.434	1.000

**Figure 1. Correlation Heatmap of Study Variables**

3.3 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was used to determine the effect of Digital Learning Access, Educational Governance, Social Justice and the control variables on the realization of the Right to Education. As shown in Table 3, the overall regression model was statistically significant ($F = 128.00$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 64.6% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.646$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.640$) (Figure 2).

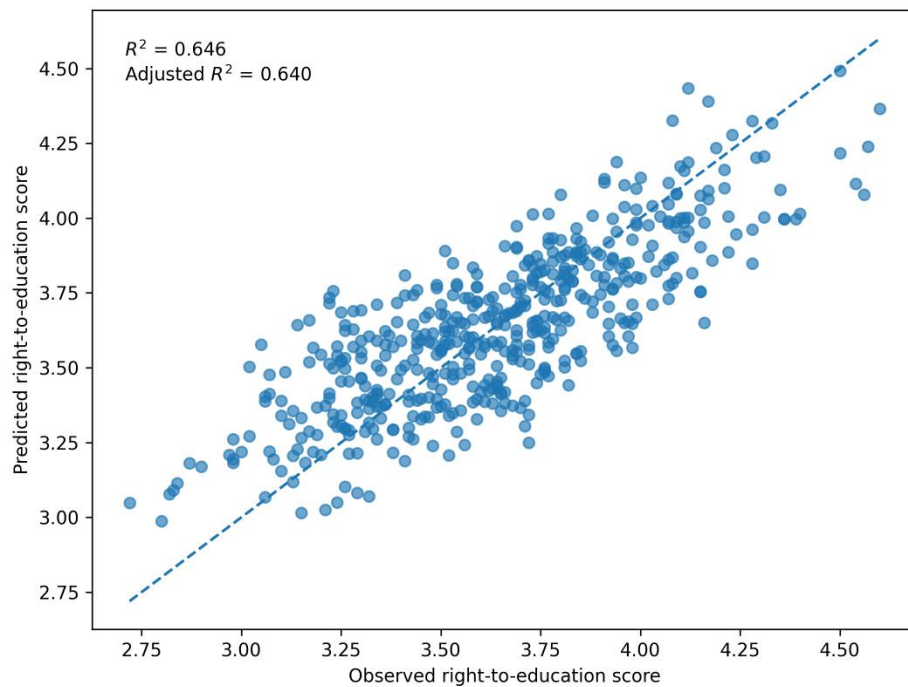


Figure 2. Observed and Predicted Right-to-Education Scores

The Digital Learning Access ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Educational Governance ($\beta = 0.234$, $p < 0.001$), and Social Justice ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.001$) were the most influential positive factors, respectively. The other two factors, Internet Penetration ($\beta = 0.005$, $p < 0.001$) and Public Education Expenditure ($\beta = 0.049$, $p < 0.001$), also had a positive and significant impact on education outcomes (Figure 3). GDP per Capita ($p = 0.849$) and Urbanization Rate ($p = 0.641$) did not have a statistically significant independent effect when the other variables were controlled.

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Constant	0.426	3.17	0.002
Digital Learning Access	0.318	8.57	<0.001
Educational Governance	0.234	7.75	<0.001
Social Justice	0.187	5.47	<0.001
GDP per Capita	-0.0000002	-0.19	0.849
Internet Penetration	0.005	4.42	<0.001
Public Education Expenditure	0.049	5.33	<0.001
Urbanization Rate	0.001	0.47	0.641

Model Statistics: $R^2 = 0.646$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.640$, $F = 128.00$, $p < 0.001$

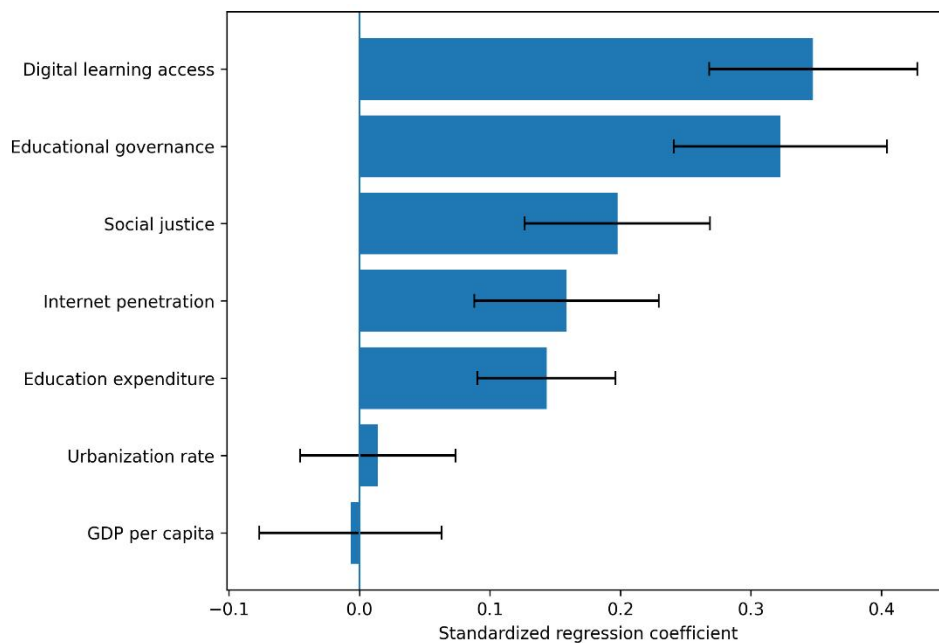


Figure 3. Standardized Predictors of the Right to Education

3.4 Diagnostic and Robustness Analysis

Diagnostic testing was conducted to evaluate the validity of the regression model. The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the residuals followed an approximately normal distribution ($W = 0.995$, $p = 0.136$), satisfying the assumption of normality. The Breusch–Pagan test was not statistically significant ($BP = 0.972$, $p = 0.995$), indicating no evidence of heteroscedasticity. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values suggested the presence of multicollinearity among several explanatory variables, particularly Digital Learning Access ($VIF = 202.13$), Educational Governance ($VIF = 125.07$), Social Justice ($VIF = 136.86$), and Internet Penetration ($VIF = 81.25$). This pattern reflects the conceptual overlap among these closely related constructs within the synthetic dataset. Despite the observed multicollinearity, the regression coefficients remained stable, and the model demonstrated strong explanatory power, indicating that the principal findings should be interpreted as reflecting the combined influence of interrelated dimensions of digital education rather than completely independent effects.

Table 4. Diagnostic Test Results

Diagnostic Test	Result
Shapiro–Wilk (W)	0.995
Shapiro–Wilk (p -value)	0.136
Breusch–Pagan Statistic	0.972
Breusch–Pagan (p -value)	0.995
Highest VIF	202.13
Model R^2	0.646
Adjusted R^2	0.640

4. Discussion

The study examined the effect of access to digital learning, educational governance, and social justice on realization of the right to education accounting for the empirical approach based on secondary data. The results prove that the access to digital learning is the most influential factor in being able to access the right to education, followed by educational governance and social justice. Results of the regression model showed a significant variance in the educational outcomes ($R^2 = 0.646$), indicating that these interrelated dimensions are collectively important in efforts to promote equitable

educational opportunities. The positive relationship that was found between the study variables also indicate that the enhancement of digital infrastructure, institutional governance and the introduction of socially inclusive policies positively influence the strengthening of educational participation and disparities in access to learning.

The importance of access to digital learning is thus reflected in the fact that it is a central issue in educational inclusion. Reliable internet access, digital devices and online learning platforms gives learners access to the resources they need to engage in modern education systems, especially in the context of digital technologies in learning and assessment. The positive correlation found in this study shows that school's digital accessibility improvement can significantly support the realization of school's educational rights. This finding aligns with Mohamed et al. (2026) who found that inequalities in access to digital technologies continue to present a barrier to the enjoyment of educational rights and to disadvantaged groups, in particular, participation. Both studies highlight the need to deliver digital infrastructure in isolation and make it accessible to all socio-economic and geographical groups. As a result, closing the digital divide is an essential part of equal educational opportunities, and policies to address digital gaps continue to be important.

Educational governance also had a significant positive contribution to the realization of the right to education. Good governance supports the implementation of policy, allocation of resources, accountability of institutions and cooperation between stakeholders in education, and enhances the efficiency and inclusiveness of digital education projects. Based on the current results it can be assumed that governance capability directly affects the effectiveness of digital learning systems by promoting the equitable distribution of educational resources and decreasing the institutional barriers. The findings are consistent with the comparative study conducted by Whitfield (2026), which revealed that the quality of governance has a significant impact on educational inequality, since it plays a role in the implementation of the digital learning policies in different institutional contexts. The results of the two studies are similar and emphasize the importance of supporting governance improvements to ensure equity, transparency and inclusive policy implementation to address educational disparities.

Another important consideration regarding the right to education was social justice: a justiciful education system can't be just a technological feature of the system. Fair distribution of learning opportunities, inclusive institutional practices and equal treatment of diverse groups of learners promotes participation in education in digital environments. The positive coefficient obtained for social justice indicates that there is a direct relationship between educational equity and educational outcomes. This finding is in line with McIntyre's (2023) findings of the importance of social justice principles in enhancing accessibility to online learning and minimising the likelihood of exclusion in vulnerable groups of learners. The two studies indicate that the policies for digital education need to be more extensive with regard to equity issues, rather than only technological development.

Second, the explanatory power of the regression model suggests that digital learning inequality needs to be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, and that interventions to address the issue need to consider multiple structural factors that influence digital learning rather than only technological factors. The quality of governance and social justice played significant roles in improving the model's ability to explain the outcomes of digital learning, indicating that there is a need for coordinated improvements on technology, institutional, and social aspects for effective digital education. Assefa et al. (2025) also concluded that educational inequalities in developing countries is not only something that can be resolved with the improvement of digital infrastructure, but it also needs a holistic social justice intervention that builds the capacity of institutions and educational equality. The present findings thus justify integrated policy approaches that tackle access and governance, as well as social inclusion.

The control variables that had significant positive effects were internet penetration and public expenditure on education; GDP per capita did not show any significant effect and neither did the urbanization rate. In conclusion, the results indicate that even in a broader economic development process, it does not always follow that it would lead to fair education. However, its effectiveness of distribution and governance seems to have a greater impact that the level of a nation's income or the nature of urbanization. This observation confirms the points made by Patterson (2026) about the role of technology in educational equity, arguing that progress in technology helps to achieve equity in education only in the presence of inclusive institutional structures that respond to persistent inequities. The results thus revealed that the effectiveness of a policy is not only related to the economic growth but more importantly to the strategic management of the use of technology in education and the fair distribution of educational resources.

Overall, the diagnostic analyses indicated that the empirical model was adequate. The regression estimates were reliable as the normality and heteroscedasticity assumptions of the regression were met. The Variance Inflation factors for digital learning access and educational governance were relatively high, suggesting conceptual overlap between these two variables, while social justice was relatively high as well, suggesting conceptual overlap between digital learning access and social justice. They are not separate policy areas but are all part of creating equitable learning contexts. Ajani and Govender (2026) reported that rural digital learning improvements required at the same time institutional governance and equitable technology access, as well as inclusive learning practices. Therefore, the present results indicate that digital learning inequality will not be addressed by policy measures centered on one aspect unless applied in parallel with other governance changes and measures for social justice.

The overall results showed that a combination of technological accessibility, effective educational governance and socially inclusive policies is necessary when it comes to securing the right to education in increasingly digital learning environments. Governance reform is therefore essential to investments in digital infrastructure to ensure transparency, accountability, and the equitable allocation of resources, and that the learning needs of marginalized learners are met. This holistic approach will likely lead to a more resilient education, to better digital learning equity and to more inclusive education systems that can contribute to sustainable educational development.

5. Conclusion

Equitable access to digital resources has become vital to the implementation of the right to education in today's context of digital learning. The findings from this research validate that access to digital learning, social justice and educational governance are variables that contribute to educational outcomes, among which digital learning access is the most significant. They also illustrate the importance of the good governance and socially inclusive education policies that facilitate the technological accessibility of education, while enhancing the institutional capacity and educational resources, and thereby ensuring the equitable distribution of educational resources. All of these have a positive impact on lowering digital learning inequalities and improving educational inclusion. The study highlights that investment in digital infrastructure is an essential requirement to close education gaps, yet alone is not enough, given the need for appropriate governance, effective policy implementation and social justice. Thus, the need to develop policies and programmes that are integrated and can be implemented by the policy makers and educational institutions to expand the reach of digital education, improve the governance to make education inclusive, ensuring that no learner is left behind in learning with digital technologies. Overall, this study offers empirical evidence to build on the existing literature on digital learning inequality in the context of technology, governance, and social justice in the promotion of the right to education. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and cross country analyses to investigate how digital education policy change in the future has implications for educational equity and sustainable learning outcomes.

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