

THE LEGAL PRACTITIONERS BILL 2025: KEY INNOVATIONS, STRUCTURAL REFORMS, AND LINGERING GAPS

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Introduction

For the first time in over half a century, Nigeria stands at the threshold of a sweeping transformation of its legal profession. The Legal Practitioners Bill 2025, intended to repeal and replace the Legal Practitioners Act of 1962 (Cap L11, LFN 2004), arrives at a moment when the legal landscape has grown far more complex than the framework that currently governs it. Ethical breaches are increasingly publicized, quackery and impersonation continue to undermine the profession's credibility, young lawyers struggle with inadequate remuneration and the absence of structured mentorship, and technological advancements are reshaping not only how law is practiced but also the expectations of those who rely on legal services. At the same time, Nigeria's justice institutions suffer from chronic underfunding and operational bottlenecks, even as cross-border legal services expand and demand a regulatory framework capable of sustaining international cooperation. These pressures, coupled with the growing need for transparency, accountability, and stronger professional safeguards, have made it clear that incremental amendments would no longer suffice. The 2025 Bill therefore attempts a wholesale reconstruction of professional regulation, discipline, training, and practice standards; an ambitious effort to align Nigeria's legal profession with contemporary global norms while addressing long-standing structural weaknesses.

2.0 The Need for Reform

The 1962 Legal Practitioners Act had become obsolete for a profession facing modern pressures. The need for reform was driven by several critical factors, including an outdated legal architecture incapable of regulating modern legal practice and weak disciplinary structures that lacked transparency, responsiveness, and sufficient deterrence. Furthermore, there has been poor preparation of new lawyers, who were often pushed prematurely into independent practice without structured mentorship. The reform is also necessitated by insufficient penalties, including the long-ridiculed ₦100–₦200 fine for impersonation. Technological and cross-border expansion required clearer rules on digital, international, and multidisciplinary practice, all while the public demand for accountability and strengthened protection of legal consumers continued to increase.

3.0 Objectives of the Bill- Part i

The Bill seeks to achieve a variety of objectives centered on strengthening public confidence in the legal profession and promoting the rule of law and integrity in legal practice. It aims to enhance the competence, independence, and discipline of legal practitioners while improving legal education and training structures. By modernizing the regulatory framework to reflect global best practices, the Bill intends to ensure transparency, efficiency, and proportionality in regulation, ultimately supporting ethical, accountable, and professional legal services.

4.0 Key Innovations Introduced by the Bill

A major innovation found in Part ii is the transformation of the Body of Benchers into a body corporate. This gives the entity perpetual succession, a common seal, the capacity to sue and be sued, and the power to enter contracts. It also grants the authority to acquire and dispose of property, employ and discipline staff, and maintain administrative and financial autonomy. This innovation is significant because it strengthens regulatory independence, enhances institutional accountability, supports professionalized management, and aligns with global regulatory standards.

In Part iii, the Bill creates the Body of Benchers Fund, known as the Lithe Fund. This dedicated fund is sourced from government allocations through the National Judicial Council, fees, levies, and charges, as well as donations, endowments, trusts, and other lawful revenue streams. The fund is designed to cover secretariat operations, staff salaries and pensions, disciplinary and compliance functions, and infrastructure and administrative needs. However, a lapse exists in this provision, as there is no mandatory independent audit mechanism in place or a requirement for annual financial reporting, which poses a risk of poor transparency and potential mismanagement.

One of the most transformative provisions is the compulsory two-year pupillage introduced in Part vi under Section 25. This includes a mandatory two-year pupillage for all newly-called lawyers and a prohibition against opening a law firm or partnering before completing this period. Pupillage must be done under a qualified lawyer or eligible firm and includes a mandatory pupillage allowance.

Seniors must demonstrate payment of this allowance as part of their professional record. A Committee for Pupillage Eligibility and Oversight will be established to assess which lawyers and firms may take pupils, verify payment of allowances, handle complaints, monitor training conditions, and certify completion. Furthermore, the Legal Practitioners Privileges Committee must now consider a candidate's history of mentorship, compliance with pupillage requirements, and payment of allowances before awarding the rank of Senior Advocate of Nigeria. A noted flaw, however, is that the Bill does not specify a minimum allowance, leaving room for abuse or token payments.

Regarding the membership of the Body of Benchers under Part ii, the traditional membership includes the Chief Justice of Nigeria, all Justices of the Supreme Court, the President of the Court of Appeal, the Attorney-General of the Federation, all Presiding Justices of the Court of Appeal Divisions, the Chief Judge of the Federal High Court, the Chief Judge of the FCT, all State Chief Judges, all State Attorneys-General, the Chairman of the Council of Legal Education, the President of the Nigerian Bar Association, thirty NBA-nominated legal practitioners, and up to ten eminent legal practitioners of at least 15 years' standing appointed by the Body. The 2025 Bill seeks to add the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Chairmen of Senate and House Committees on Judiciary, provided they are lawyers of not less than 15 years post-call. There is a fear that these additions risk politicizing the regulation of the profession and undermining institutional independence by creating a precedent where professional regulatory authority is influenced by partisan officeholders.

Part vii introduces stricter requirements for foreign lawyers and seeks to repeal the Professional Bodies (Special Provisions) Act, Cap P33, LFN 2004. Foreign lawyers applying for temporary admission must present a valid practicing license from their home jurisdiction and collaborate mandatorily with a Nigerian lawyer before appearing in proceedings. This is intended to protect the domestic legal market, ensure accountability, and prevent the circumvention of professional regulations. Additionally, the penalty for impersonation of a legal practitioner rises significantly from the previous ₦100–₦200 to ₦5,000,000, aimed at erecting stronger deterrence against quackery.

The Bill also provides a clearer definition of legal practice in Part vii to reduce ambiguities used by unqualified persons. This includes the preparation of legal documents such as contracts, pleadings, and wills; giving legal advice or opinions on liabilities and compliance; and drafting court or tribunal processes like motions and briefs. It also covers handling instruments affecting property or title, such as leases and mortgages; negotiating legal rights or acting as an intermediary in settlements; and holding oneself out as a legal practitioner through titles or maintaining a law office. This definition extends to any other activity reserved for lawyers by law, whether undertaken physically, electronically, or through any digital platform.

In Part v, the Bill significantly strengthens the powers of the Legal Practitioners Disciplinary Committee (LPDC). The LPDC now has explicit authority to determine cases involving professional misconduct, mishandling of client funds, negligence, violations of the pupillage system (including non-payment of allowances), and misconduct arising from collaborations with foreign lawyers. Its investigative powers are bolstered, allowing it to summon witnesses, demand financial and electronic data, issue subpoenas, and collaborate with law enforcement. The LPDC can also issue interim measures such as provisional suspensions or preservation orders on client funds. It may impose a wider range of sanctions, including financial penalties, restitution, and firm-level sanctions. Furthermore, the Bill mandates that LPDC decisions are immediately enforceable and published in an online disciplinary registry to end delays that previously allowed sanctioned lawyers to continue practicing.

5.0 Lingering Gaps and Critiques

No Minimum Pupillage Allowance Specified

The Bill leaves open the possibility for exploitation by failing to set a baseline allowance for pupillage. This gap may result in non-standardized, inadequate, or merely nominal payments to trainees, undermining the intended benefit of compulsory pupillage.

Neglect of General Lawyers' Welfare

The Bill largely ignores the welfare of practicing lawyers outside elite regulatory circles. It does not address the minimum wages for lawyers, protections against workplace abuse and harassment and health insurance or pension schemes for private practitioners. This oversight indicates a top-heavy focus on regulatory elites rather than on the average lawyer.

New Requirement for Conferment of Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN) Rank

The Bill mandates that lawyers must now wait 15 years post-call to be eligible to apply for the rank, a significant departure from the current 10-year position. This change is viewed by many as an unnecessary barrier that further gatekeeps the upper echelon of the profession and delays the recognition of exceptional talent.

Politicization of the Body of Benchers

The proposed structure risks political interference in the Body of Benchers, potentially affecting its independence and the fairness of disciplinary decisions. This politicization is inconsistent with global standards for professional self-regulation.

Silence on Legal-Tech and Digital Practice

The Bill does not account for emerging technological developments in legal practice, such as the use of artificial intelligence, the operation of virtual law offices, cybersecurity obligations, and governance of digital evidence, and data protection in client services.

This omission leaves Nigeria's legal framework unprepared for a rapidly digitizing profession.

Silence on Legal-Tech and Digital Practice

Without a clear, mandatory audit mechanism, fund management risks opacity, potentially discouraging donor participation and weakening accountability.

The Bill does not provide a structured pathway for collaboration between lawyers and other professionals, such as tax experts, compliance analysts, or technology specialists. This limits innovation and modern practice models.

No Framework for Multidisciplinary Practice

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Retains Overlapping Roles Between Regulators and the NBA

The persistence of overlapping functions between regulatory bodies and the Nigerian Bar Association may create conflicts of interest, blurring the lines between professional advocacy and independent regulation.

Conclusion

The Legal Practitioners Bill 2025, currently under review before the Senate represents a significant step forward in reforming Nigeria's legal profession. It introduces important innovations, such as compulsory pupillage with allowances, stronger disciplinary mechanisms, a corporate Body of Benchers, and modernized definitions of legal practice, while updating outdated penalties and structures.

Nevertheless, the Bill exposes critical vulnerabilities: risks of political encroachment, insufficient safeguards for junior lawyers, neglect of technological developments, and limited transparency in fund management. While a substantial improvement, the Bill is not yet comprehensive. To ensure transformative impact, stakeholders must refine these gaps to make the reforms inclusive and effective for all levels of the profession, not only its upper tier.

Before passing the Bill into law, the Senate should carefully examine these lapses and engage in meaningful collaboration with the Nigerian Bar Association and the broader body of practicing lawyers. Such consultations would help ensure a fairer, more inclusive, and far-reaching Legal Practitioners Act that serves all levels of the profession, not only its upper tier.