



Original Article

Ethiopia's education and training policy (2023): a paradigm shift toward competency, autonomy, and equity

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Abstract

The 2023 Education and Training Policy (ETP) represent Ethiopia's most comprehensive education reform in over three decades. It introduces major reforms, including competency-based curricula, university autonomy, expansion of early childhood education (O-Class), and strengthened accountability mechanisms such as the Approach, Deployment, Results, and Improvement (ADRI) audit model and performance contracts. This paper analyzes the objectives, core components, and implementation strategies of the 2023 ETP, comparing them with the 1994 policy framework to demonstrate a significant paradigm shift in governance, curriculum, assessment, and equity orientation. Drawing on official policy documents, program evaluations (e.g., GEQIP-E), and international education reports, the study identifies enabling factors, implementation risks, and policy implications. While the policy is well aligned with global and African education reform agendas, its success will depend on phased implementation, institutional capacity building, and sustained, equity-focused financing.

1 Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a key driver of sustainable development, social equity, and 2020 agenda emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all, highlighting the importance of lifelong learning and competency development (UNESCO, 2015). African education policy frameworks, particularly the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25), underscore the need for competency-based education, science and technology integration, and governance reforms to strengthen learning outcomes across the continent (African Union, 2016). Despite these initiatives, disparities in access, quality, and equity persist in many low-income countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022). These global and continental trends provide an important contextual backdrop for Ethiopia's recent education policy reform.

Since the adoption of the 1994 Education and Training Policy, Ethiopia has made notable progress in expanding access to primary and secondary education. Gross enrollment rates have increased substantially, and gender parity has improved in many regions (Ministry of Education, 2023). Nevertheless, learning outcomes remain suboptimal, with national and international assessments indicating low proficiency in reading, mathematics, and science, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas (World Bank, 2020). These

persistent challenges highlight the need for comprehensive reform that addresses quality, equity, and institutional effectiveness, motivating the development of the 2023 Education and Training Policy.

The 2023 ETP aligns with international and African policy trends by strengthening governance structures, implementing competency-based curricula, introducing continuous assessment, expanding early childhood education, and enhancing accountability and quality assurance mechanisms (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2023; World Bank, 2024). By situating the policy within both global and African contexts, this study demonstrates that Ethiopia's reform seeks not only to address national priorities but also to conform to recognized international standards of educational quality and equity.

2 Conceptual and theoretical framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is informed by Policy Implementation Theory and Human Capital Theory. Policy Implementation Theory emphasizes that successful reform depends on alignment between policy objectives, institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, and monitoring mechanisms (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Human Capital Theory posits that investments in education particularly in early childhood development and competency formation enhance individual productivity and contribute to long-term social and economic development (Becker, 1993).

Within the context of Ethiopia's 2023 ETP, this framework links policy inputs—such as curriculum reform, governance restructuring, early childhood education expansion, and teacher professional development—to outputs including improved competencies, learning outcomes, and institutional performance. Curriculum reform emphasizes competency-based approaches, integration of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM), and incorporation of indigenous knowledge to ensure relevance and contextual grounding. University autonomy grants institutions greater authority over governance, curricula, and financial management under Proclamation No. 1294/2023, while maintaining accountability through performance contracts and standardized audits. Early childhood education expansion prioritizes nationwide rollout of O-Class programs supported by targeted teacher training and curriculum development. Teacher professional development focuses on continuous training, mentoring, and capacity-building initiatives to support effective implementation of competency-based education.

Implementation mechanisms mediate the relationship between policy inputs and outcomes. The ADRI audit model provides a structured framework for quality assurance through continuous monitoring, evaluation, and improvement. Performance contracts strengthen accountability by linking institutional outputs to measurable standards. Decentralized decision-making empowers schools and universities to respond to local needs while remaining aligned with national objectives. Strategic partnerships and external financing through initiatives such as the General Education Quality Improvement Program for Equity (GEQIP-E) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) further support effective policy implementation.

The anticipated outcomes include enhanced student competencies, improved learning outcomes in core subjects, and strengthened institutional effectiveness. Equity and inclusion are central objectives, with particular emphasis on girls, children with disabilities, and learners in marginalized or crisis-affected regions.

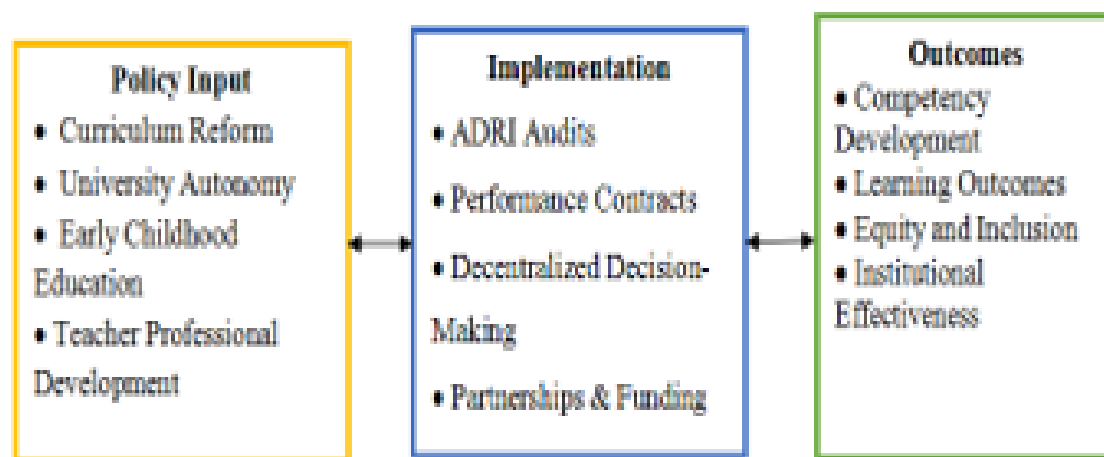


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for Ethiopia's 2023 education and training policy

3 Literature review on education policy

3.1 Global education policy trends

Globally, education policies increasingly emphasize competency-based learning, inclusive education, and robust quality assurance systems. High-performing education systems such as those in Finland, Singapore, and Canada prioritize curriculum relevance, teacher autonomy, and continuous assessment rather than rote learning (OECD, 2019; Sahlberg, 2015). International frameworks, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), advocate lifelong learning, inclusive access, and effective integration of technology to enhance learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2020). These trends reflect a shift from quantity-focused expansion toward quality, equity, and skills-oriented education.

3.2 African education policy context

Within Africa, the African Union's CESA 16-25 framework provides a strategic roadmap for improving educational quality and aligning education systems with socio-economic development objectives (African Union, 2016). Countries such as Kenya, Rwanda, and South Africa have adopted competency-based curricula, strengthened teacher professional development, and introduced reforms promoting university autonomy (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Moon, 2022). However, many countries continue to face challenges related to limited institutional capacity, resource constraints, and regional inequalities—challenges that are also relevant to the Ethiopian context.

3.3 Ethiopian education policy evolution

Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy emphasized access expansion and administrative decentralization to regional governments. While these reforms significantly increased enrollment, the policy relied heavily on centralized assessment systems and provided limited early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2023). In contrast, the 2023 ETP introduces transformative reforms, including university autonomy under Proclamation No. 1294/2023, competency-based curricula from kindergarten through Grade

12, nationwide expansion of O-Class programs, enhanced teacher professional development, and ADRI-based quality assurance mechanisms.

3.4 Theoretical underpinning

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) provides a rationale for prioritizing investments in early childhood education and competency development as foundations for productivity and national development. Policy Implementation Theory (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) underscores the importance of institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, and effective coordination for translating policy intentions into practice.

4 Research methods

This study employs a qualitative policy document analysis approach. Primary sources include the 2023 Education and Training Policy, Proclamation No. 1294/2023 on university autonomy, and GEQIP-E program documents. Secondary sources consist of UNESCO and African Union policy reports, World Bank publications, and peer-reviewed academic literature. The analysis focused on policy objectives, core content, implementation strategies, key differences from the 1994 policy, and potential challenges in achieving intended outcomes.

5 Findings and discussion

5.1 Objectives of the 2023 policy

The 2023 ETP articulates five primary objectives: enhancing the quality and relevance of education in line with national development goals; promoting equity and inclusion for marginalized populations; expanding and professionalizing early childhood education; granting universities greater autonomy while ensuring accountability; and reforming curriculum and assessment systems by shifting from rote learning toward competency-based approaches that foster higher-order thinking skills.

5.2 Main contents and implementation strategies

University autonomy is operationalized through Proclamation No. 1294/2023, granting institutions increased authority over governance, curricula, and financial management, coupled with accountability mechanisms such as ADRI audits and performance contracts. Curriculum reform introduces competency-based approaches across subject areas, integrating STEAM, indigenous knowledge, ethics, and skills development. Assessment reform replaces high-stakes terminal examinations with continuous, formative assessments aligned with national benchmarks. Early childhood education expansion focuses on nationwide rollout of O-Class programs supported by teacher training, curriculum materials, and systematic monitoring. Quality assurance is strengthened through ADRI audits and oversight by the Education and Training Authority. Equity measures prioritize crisis-affected regions and vulnerable groups, supported by donor-funded programs including GEQIP-E and GPE.

5.3 Differences from the 1994 policy

Compared with the 1994 ETP, the 2023 policy represents a clear paradigm shift. Governance moves from centralized control to institutional autonomy with structured accountability. Curriculum shifts from content-heavy instruction to competency-based learning. Assessment transitions from high-stakes examinations to continuous evaluation. Early childhood education expands from limited provision to nationwide O-Class programs. Quality assurance evolves from accreditation-focused models to continuous improvement frameworks, and equity becomes an explicit policy priority.

Table 1: Comparison of Ethiopia’s 1994 and 2023 ETP

Dimension	1994 ETP	2023 ETP
Governance	University autonomy under Proclamation Ministry of Education control; limited institutional autonomy with accountability mechanisms	Competency-based, integrates STEAM, indigenous knowledge, skills development
Curriculum	Theory-heavy, content-focused, rote learning	Continuous, formative, competency-based assessments linked to national benchmarks
Assessment	High-stakes, terminal examinations	Nationwide O-Class rollout with teacher training and curriculum support
Early Childhood Education	Limited provision	Continuous Professional development, mentoring, and capacity-building programs
Teacher Professional Development	Ad-hoc training; limited capacity-building	ADRI audits, institutional performance contracts, continuous monitoring
Quality Assurance	Accreditation-focused	Explicit focus on girls, children with disabilities, crisis-affected regions
Equity	Limited focus	Aligns with National priorities; SDG4, CESA 16-25, UNESCO 2030, and international best practices
Alignment	Policy less aligned with global/continental frameworks	Enhancing quality, equity, and decentralization effectiveness
Key Goal	Access expansion and decentralization	

6 Discussion and implications

The 2023 ETP reflects a comprehensive effort to modernize Ethiopia’s education system. While university autonomy has the potential to enhance innovation and responsiveness, it requires phased implementation and strong institutional capacity to mitigate governance and financial risks (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Curriculum reforms align with global recommendations emphasizing competencies and learner-centered pedagogy, but their success depends heavily on teacher preparedness and sustained professional development (Moon, 2022). Expansion of O-Class programs offers substantial long-term benefits, although challenges related to teacher supply, resource allocation, and monitoring remain significant (Heckman, 2011).

The ADRI audit model introduces an innovative quality assurance approach focused on continuous improvement. However, insufficient capacity or excessive compliance demands could undermine its effectiveness (University World News, 2025). Equity-focused strategies are promising but require adequate financing, flexible implementation, and context-sensitive approaches, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected areas (UNICEF, 2023).

7 Recommendations

Teacher professional development should be strengthened through nationwide continuous training, coaching, and mentoring programs. University autonomy should be implemented gradually, guided by clearly defined capacity benchmarks. ADRI audits should be piloted and refined before full national rollout. Equity-focused financing mechanisms should prioritize marginalized populations and underserved regions. Performance contracts should reward measurable improvements in learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness rather than procedural compliance alone.

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Data Availability

Data can be made available on reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

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