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# Governing higher education system as consumable goods for enhancing the employability of graduates in Ethiopia

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The Ethiopian higher education system faces serious challenges in graduate employability, primarily due to a disconnect between academic curricula and labor market needs. Many graduates struggle to find meaningful employment, exacerbated by concerns over declining educational quality amid rapid institutional expansion. In light of these issues, this policy brief draws on findings from a 3-year research project titled “Education and Development in Ethiopia.” It emphasizes the urgent need for reforms in higher education, advocating for greater institutional autonomy, curriculum updates, inclusivity, and job-oriented programs that align with market demands. The brief aims to establish a structured policy framework for assessing educational outcomes, ultimately enhancing the quality of higher education in Ethiopia and better equipping graduates for success in the workforce.

## KEYWORDS

higher education, graduates, employability, policy options, Ethiopia

## 1 Introduction

In Ethiopia, the image of graduate employability performance looms large, casting a shadow over the country's higher education system and its aspiring graduates (Bareke et al., 2021; Alemayehu, 2021; Karorsa and Polka, 2015). This issue has ignited impassioned debates regarding its underlying causes, with some attributing it to the rapid expansion of higher education, often referred to as the “massification of higher education” (Ashcroft, 2004), while others point to the perceived quality deficit in the educational experience itself (Bareke et al., 2021, 2023; Alemayehu, 2021; Karorsa and Polka, 2015). Regardless of the root causes, graduate unemployment remains a pervasive concern that resonates across various stakeholders, encompassing graduates, parents, government authorities, employers, academicians, and educational institutions alike. For an alarming number of graduates, the post-university transition to gainful employment in their chosen fields has proven elusive, leaving them with acquired knowledge that the labor market struggles to efficiently consume. In this context, it is imperative to embark on comprehensive studies that scrutinize the origins and far-reaching consequences of graduate unemployment in Ethiopia. Such investigations will not only serve as a diagnostic tool but also lay the groundwork for the formulation of effective policies and strategies to tackle this pressing challenge.

Prior studies have made significant efforts to illuminate the complex dimensions of graduate unemployment in Ethiopia. However, the issue continues to persist, as highlighted by previous studies (Jote, 2017; Reda and Gebre-Eyesus, 2018; Yibeltal Yizengaw, 2018; Mekonnen, 2021). This policy brief has emerged from a 3-year initiative that was initiated and supported by Dilla University from 2019 to 2022. The initiative, titled “Education and Development in Ethiopia: Existing Realities, Pressing Concerns, and Implications for Education Reforms” (Demissie et al., 2021; Bareke et al., 2021, 2023; Yimer et al., 2024), aimed to provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities within the Ethiopian education system. This research project involved a comprehensive analysis of the trends and determinants of human capital development in the country (Bareke et al., 2021, 2023), as well as the intricate relationship between graduation and employability (Yimer et al., 2024) and the factors contributing to graduates’ unemployment (Demissie et al., 2021). Over the course of this study, a total of four articles were produced, with three of them subsequently being published in reputable international journals, while one is currently in the process of publication. The research methodology employed a blend of quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, literature review, surveys, interviews, and more. It drew upon a wide array of primary and secondary sources, including graduates and officials from higher education institutions. The synthesis of these articles and the broader research findings serve as a solid foundation for the evidence-based policy recommendations presented in this brief. These recommendations are intended to inform and guide policymakers in making informed decisions to address the pressing issue of graduate unemployment in Ethiopia.

Building on the insights gleaned from these studies, our thematic investigation adopted a multinomial logistic approach as one of the methods employed in the project to delve deeper into the critical issues at the heart of this crisis (Demissie et al., 2021; Bareke et al., 2021, 2023). Our objective is to forge a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play as well as to present actionable policy recommendations and interventions. The urgency of addressing graduate employability in Ethiopian higher education cannot be overstated. Recent graduates, the lifeblood of any nation’s workforce, are grappling with obstacles that threaten not only their individual prospects but also the vitality of the entire higher education ecosystem. Drawing on extensive research, including the application of multinomial logistic regression analysis, this brief underscores the need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of the symbiotic relationship between the labor market and higher education in Ethiopia. It offers tangible policy options designed to address the formidable challenges that loom on the sector.

## 2 Reforming higher education employability: strategies for bridging education and workforce needs

In the face of evolving labor market demands, reforming higher education to enhance graduate employability has become a pressing priority. As economies transform and job requirements shift, it is

essential for higher education institutions (HEIs) to adapt their strategies and curricula to better prepare students for successful careers. This section explores key strategies for bridging the gap between education and workforce needs, focusing on empowering HEIs, developing job-driven programs, managing the interplay between education and the labor market, and establishing effective measurement frameworks.

### 2.1 Empowering higher education institutions

In today’s rapidly changing educational landscape, the empowerment of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become increasingly vital. Research by Hailu et al. (2024a,b) underscores the imperative to grant HEIs greater autonomy to enhance educational quality, equity, and responsiveness. This empowerment is crucial for improving their effectiveness in addressing labor market needs. With increased autonomy, HEIs can design curricula that align with labor market demands, foster inclusive learning environments, and adapt programs to meet evolving workforce needs. Marginson (2018) corroborates this by arguing that institutional autonomy strengthens HEIs’ capacity to innovate and address regional economic disparities, suggesting that independent operation allows institutions to tailor their programs to better serve their communities. To advance inclusivity, Hailu et al. (2024a,b) emphasize targeted strategies to reduce age and gender disparities among students, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, institutions in sub-Saharan Africa have implemented flexible entry requirements and scholarships for underrepresented groups, improving access while maintaining academic rigor (UNESCO, 2022). These implications point toward a need for policy reforms that strengthen the autonomy of HEIs, foster inclusivity, and enhance their responsiveness to labor market demands, ultimately contributing to economic development and social equity.

### 2.2 Job-driven program development

In an era where the demands of the job market are constantly evolving, it is crucial for educational institutions to align their programs with the needs of employers. Mekonnen et al. (2024) advocate for labor market-aligned curricula to bridge the gap between graduate skills and employer expectations, urging policymakers to prioritize “work-ready” competencies such as critical thinking and digital literacy, which are increasingly demanded in globalized economies. By focusing on these competencies, educational institutions can better prepare students for the realities of the job market, addressing existing skill gaps and anticipating future workforce needs, thereby enhancing graduates’ competitiveness. Bastedo et al. (2016) reinforce this perspective by highlighting the importance of industry partnerships in curriculum co-design to ensure that programs reflect real-world challenges. For instance, Germany’s dual education system, which integrates academic training with apprenticeships, has successfully reduced youth unemployment by 15% compared to conventional

models (OECD, 2019). Such collaborations not only help higher education institutions anticipate sectoral shifts, like the rise of green technologies, but also serve as a potential blueprint for other countries aiming to enhance their educational frameworks and reduce unemployment rates among graduates.

## 2.3 Managing the interplay between higher education and the labor market

In today's rapidly changing economic landscape, the relationship between higher education and the labor market has never been more critical. Demissie et al. (2021) identify systemic misalignments between enrollment trends, graduation rates, and employment outcomes, particularly exacerbated by political instability in regions like East Africa. They emphasize that simply increasing the number of graduates is not enough; if their skills do not align with labor market demands, high unemployment rates will persist, especially in low-income countries where informal employment is prevalent (Carnoy et al., 2020). To tackle these challenges, Demissie and colleagues recommend resilience-building strategies, such as diversifying economies and enhancing public-private dialogues, alongside implementing longitudinal graduate tracking systems to monitor employment outcomes and inform policy reforms. For instance, Ethiopia's Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) has conducted tracer studies that revealed mismatches in sectors like engineering and agriculture, prompting necessary curriculum revisions (Demissie et al., 2021). Overall, these findings suggest that a strategic and collaborative effort is required to effectively manage the interplay between higher education and the labor market. By focusing on resilience, data monitoring, and continuous curriculum adaptation, we can better equip graduates with the skills needed to thrive in an evolving economic landscape.

## 2.4 Developing a measurement framework for employability performance of HEIs

In the quest to enhance the relevance of higher education, it is crucial to establish effective ways to measure how well institutions prepare their graduates for the workforce. Geletu and Adige (2023a,b) call for standardized metrics to evaluate higher education institutions' (HEIs) employability outcomes, such as graduate employment rates, employer satisfaction, and income levels. They emphasize that establishing a standardized measurement framework is essential for promoting accountability and driving continuous improvement. Expanding on this idea, Kinash et al. (2015) advocate for multi-dimensional frameworks that assess not only immediate job placement but also soft skills, lifelong learning, and career progression of alumni. This broader perspective acknowledges that employability involves developing skills that contribute to long-term career success. A prime example of this approach can be seen in Australia's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), which combines graduate surveys and employer feedback to rank institutions annually (Department of Education Australia, 2023). Geletu and Adige

(2023a,b) argue that such frameworks incentivize HEIs to prioritize employability and suggest that regular audits, paired with funding tied to performance metrics, could create strong incentives for institutions to improve their outcomes. This implies that financial support could be contingent upon demonstrating effective graduate employability outcomes, fostering a culture of accountability and motivating institutions to innovate and adapt their programs accordingly. Overall, by incorporating these metrics, stakeholders can gain clearer insights into how effectively HEIs prepare students for the workforce and identify areas for improvement.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Graduates employability in Ethiopia: the existing realities

There has been a growing emphasis on the crucial impact that higher education has on enhancing the skills and career opportunities for university graduates in Ethiopia. However, despite the steady influx of graduates each year, research has highlighted a persistent disconnect between completing their studies and securing employment. Over the last 20 years, many graduates have experienced prolonged job searches, and this trend seems to persist. The following sections will delve into these issues, drawing on recent empirical findings.

The research conducted by Demissie et al. (2021), delves into the reasons behind unemployment and underemployment among higher education graduates in Ethiopia. Through a quantitative lens, the study gathered insights from 359 graduates across five regions and utilized multinomial logistic regression for its analysis. The results revealed that demographic factors, such as age and gender, play a significant role in employment outcomes; older graduates generally face lower unemployment rates, while male graduates often experience higher levels of underemployment. Interestingly, the study found no significant link between academic performance, as measured by cumulative grade point average (CGPA), and unemployment status. It highlighted the importance of curriculum and institutional factors, noting that a curriculum aligned with labor market needs can greatly improve job prospects. Additionally, the broader economic landscape, including the demand for skilled labor, significantly influences employment outcomes, with economic conditions directly affecting job availability. The study also pointed out that global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and advancements in technology, are reshaping employment dynamics. It advocates for higher education institutions to revise their curricula to better align with labor market demands and create supportive environments for graduates. Furthermore, it calls for policy level and strategic reforms in higher education policies to enhance employability. Ultimately, this research underscores the intricate relationship between various factors impacting graduates' employment status in Ethiopia and highlights the urgent need for systemic changes in the education sector (Demissie et al., 2021).

In another study by Yimer et al. (2024), the scholars explore trends in higher education enrolment, graduation rates, and employment over the past 15 years in Ethiopia. They highlight a significant increase in enrolment rates, which surged from

around 98,404 students in 2004 to an expected 533,077 by 2025, driven by population growth and enhanced institutional capacity. However, graduation rates have not kept pace with this surge; for example, only 62,199 graduates were produced in 2018 despite high enrolment figures. The study warns that graduation rates may decline due to government-imposed quality control measures. It also raises concerns about rising graduate unemployment, which averaged about 19.54% from 1999 to 2018, with predictions indicating that job demand may decrease further, complicating the transition of more graduates into the workforce. While enrolment is expected to continue growing, the employment landscape for graduates could deteriorate, leading to a misalignment between the skills acquired in higher education and those demanded by the labor market. To address these challenges, the study calls for urgent reforms including policy options aimed at enhancing graduate employability and ensuring that higher education institutions align more closely with labor market needs. Overall, the situation for graduates in Ethiopia appears precarious, as increasing enrolment does not equate to proportional job opportunities.

The challenges that higher education graduates in Ethiopia face are multifaceted and require immediate attention. Research conducted by [Demissie et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Yimer et al. \(2024\)](#) highlights a concerning gap between the growing number of graduates and their success in finding meaningful employment. This situation emphasizes the urgent need for strategic reforms in higher education policies and curricula to better prepare graduates with the skills that employers seek. By strengthening the links between educational institutions and the job market, Ethiopia can transform its higher education system into a driving force for economic growth and enhanced job opportunities. Tackling these systemic issues is crucial not only for the graduates themselves but also for the overall economic development of the nation.

### 3.2 Discussions

This policy brief sheds light on the pressing challenges that Ethiopian higher education faces regarding graduate employability. These challenges demand urgent attention and policy informed and actionable solutions.

One of the most significant hurdles is curriculum misalignment. Many higher education programs fail to meet the evolving demands of the labor market, leaving graduates without the specific skills and knowledge that employers seek. This misalignment between education and job readiness is evident in fields such as engineering and agriculture. As noted by [Demissie et al. \(2021\)](#), there are systemic misalignments among enrollment trends, graduation rates, and employment outcomes. Such discrepancies indicate that educational institutions are not adequately preparing students for the realities they will encounter in the workforce, contributing to high unemployment rates among graduates. To bridge this gap, implementing a Job-Driven Program Development strategy is crucial. [Mekonnen et al. \(2024\)](#) advocate for curricula aligned with labor market needs, stressing the importance of prioritizing work-ready competencies within educational institutions.

In addition to curriculum issues, inequitable access and inclusivity pose significant barriers to employability. There are stark disparities in access to higher education based on factors such as age, gender, and socio-economic status. These inequalities hinder underrepresented groups from securing employment opportunities. [Hailu et al. \(2024a,b\)](#) emphasize the need for targeted strategies to address these disparities, as they perpetuate cycles of poverty and stifle economic growth. The lack of inclusivity in higher education not only impacts individual graduates but also has broader implications for national development. [Marginson \(2018\)](#) highlights the importance of implementing flexible entry requirements and offering scholarships for underrepresented populations as effective measures to reduce these disparities. Strengthening the autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs) will enable them to create inclusive environments that promote equal opportunities, ultimately contributing to broader national development.

The quality and relevance of education in Ethiopian higher education is a pressing concern that affects graduates' employability. Many institutions exhibit inconsistencies in educational quality, with certain programs failing to deliver a comprehensive learning experience. [Geletu and Adige \(2023a,b\)](#) highlighted that the absence of standardized metrics to evaluate employability outcomes undermines the perceived value of degrees among employers. This inconsistency can lead to skepticism about graduates' preparedness for the workforce, complicating their transition into employment. To address this issue, [Kinash et al. \(2015\)](#) advocate for multi-dimensional frameworks that assess not only immediate job placement but also essential soft skills, lifelong learning, and the career progression of alumni.

Political instability and economic factors further complicate the employment landscape for graduates. External influences, such as fluctuating economies and political unrest, significantly impact job availability and the overall employment prospects for new graduates. As noted by [Carnoy et al. \(2020\)](#), in low-income countries where informal employment is widespread, these external pressures create an unpredictable environment for both higher education institutions and their graduates, making it increasingly challenging to secure stable jobs.

Another critical issue is the insufficient monitoring and evaluation of graduate outcomes and the performance of higher education institutions. Without effective mechanisms to assess these outcomes, identifying areas for improvement becomes difficult, leaving institutions unaccountable for their graduates' employability. [Demissie et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest that implementing longitudinal graduate tracking systems could yield valuable insights into employment outcomes, which would inform necessary policy reforms. Additionally, limited collaboration between higher education institutions and industry stakeholders exacerbates the problem by reducing practical training opportunities, internships, and job placements for students. [Bastedo et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasize the importance of industry partnerships in co-designing curricula to ensure that educational programs address real-world challenges and adequately prepare students for the workforce. The lack of such collaborations can leave graduates ill-equipped to meet employer demands, further intensifying the employability crisis. A successful example is Germany's dual education system, which integrates



academic training with apprenticeships and has reduced youth unemployment by 15% compared to traditional models (OECD, 2019). By fostering similar collaborations in Ethiopia, institutions can offer students valuable internships and job placements, ultimately enhancing their employability.

## 4 Conclusion

The matter concerning the graduate employability performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ethiopia necessitates a comprehensive examination and the formulation of effective policies aimed at addressing its underlying causes and resultant repercussions. The analysis of employability performance among higher education graduates in Ethiopia reveals significant challenges faced by recent graduates, particularly in terms of unemployment, highlighting the need for improved support and information for job seekers. Gender disparities in underemployment are also noted, emphasizing the urgency of addressing such inequalities. Academic performance, as indicated by cumulative grade point average, does not solely determine employability outcomes, with skills, experience, and market demand playing crucial roles. Factors contributing to unemployment include curriculum nature, institutional characteristics, graduates' attributes, and economic conditions, necessitating comprehensive strategies. Recommendations include empowering institutions for quality improvement, aligning study programs with market demands, bridging the gap between education and the labor market, and establishing a measurement framework for continuous evaluation. Collaboration between policymakers, institutions, and stakeholders is essential for enhancing graduates' job prospects and contributing to national development.

## 5 Actionable recommendations

To improve the career opportunities for graduates of higher education in Ethiopia, it's essential to reconsider existing policies and implement meaningful reforms in the sector. Here are some key recommendations to consider. First, it's important to address the mismatch between curricula and the needs of the job market. Many educational programs currently fall short of preparing students for the evolving demands of employers. By adopting a job-focused approach to program development, education systems can ensure that what students learn aligns with market requirements and equips them with the skills they need to be work-ready. Second, making education more accessible and inclusive has a critical importance. This involves empowering institutions to foster welcoming environments by introducing flexible entry requirements and offering targeted scholarships to underrepresented groups. Additionally, enhancing the quality and relevance of education is crucial. Establishing standardized measures to evaluate how well graduates are prepared for employment can boost the perceived value of their degrees and ensure they are ready

to enter the workforce. It's also necessary to manage the relationship between higher education and the job market effectively, especially in light of political instability and economic fluctuations that can affect job availability. Lastly, developing a strong framework for monitoring and evaluating graduate outcomes is vital. Implementing systems that track employment trends over time will provide valuable insights. Strengthening collaboration with industries will also create more opportunities for practical training, helping students gain real-world experience. Through looking to successful models, the country's HEIs can significantly enhance their graduates' employability, creating an educational framework that better serves both students and employers alike.

## Author contributions

AH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. BY: Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. MD: Conceptualization, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. MB: Data curation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. BA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. ND: Investigation, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. ML: Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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