



Beyond Access: Lessons from Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy on Quality and Equity

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP), the third major educational policy since modern education began in the country. Using a mixed research approach, the study reviews the policy's rationale, formulation, and outcomes, drawing from secondary sources such as official reports, policies, working papers, and previous research. The analysis focuses on key performance indicators of education policy, assessing ETP against its stated objectives. The policy aimed to address issues inherited from its predecessor, but the formulation process was criticized for insufficient stakeholder involvement and a lack of transparency, resulting in a top-down approach despite being locally designed. The policy's modern and pragmatic objectives, including the use of mother tongue in primary education, decentralization of management, and private sector involvement, were seen as positive changes. In terms of outcomes, the policy succeeded in expanding access to education across all levels, with notable improvements in gender equity, regional access, and socio-economic inclusivity. Decentralization also showed progress. However, the policy's failure to ensure consistent quality and relevance of education remains a significant issue. While the ETP's achievements in access and equity are commendable, its mixed results highlight the need to focus on quality improvement. This analysis suggests that lessons from the ETP's implementation should inform the current education roadmap (2018-2030) and future policy development.

Keywords: Education, quality education, equity, indicators, performance, policy

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1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of national development and societal transformation. Across the world, governments continuously reform their education systems to enhance learning outcomes, promote social equity, and accelerate economic progress. A central mechanism for driving these reforms is the development and implementation of comprehensive education policies. Education policy encompasses governmental decisions that shape educational structures, guide teaching and learning practices, and determine how resources are allocated and monitored within an education system. Such policies typically aim to promote equitable access, ensure quality and relevance, improve learning environments, prepare learners for global competitiveness, secure sustainable financing, and strengthen governance and accountability mechanisms (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015).

In Ethiopia, the 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP) stands as a historic milestone—marking the third major education policy reform since the introduction of modern schooling in the 1940s (Tekeste, 2006). The ETP was introduced during a time of significant political, economic, and social transition, following the change of government in 1991 (Belay & Melaku, 2019). Historically, each political regime in Ethiopia has replaced its predecessor's education policy, reflecting shifting ideologies and governance priorities. Hence, understanding the formulation of the 1994 ETP requires situating it within the broader macroeconomic and institutional reforms initiated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) after 1991. The transitional government's reform agenda sought to reconstruct the education system as part of a wider nation-building and decentralization process, culminating in the development of a new education and training policy framework (Challa, 2020).

The motivation for the 1994 policy stemmed largely from widespread dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of earlier education systems and their inability to ensure inclusiveness, quality, and efficiency (Abebe, 2011). A comprehensive national assessment conducted prior to the policy's formulation identified four major challenges i.e. limited access, inequity, inefficiency, and poor quality or relevance, which became the foundational pillars of the new reform agenda. The policy was subsequently operationalized through a series of Education

Sector Development Programs (ESDPs) designed to translate strategic objectives into measurable outcomes.

Effective policy analysis requires a thorough understanding of the underlying intentions of a policy, the contextual factors shaping its development, and the degree to which its stated objectives have been achieved. Despite the centrality of the 1994 ETP to Ethiopia's educational transformation, systematic empirical evaluations remain limited. While comprehensive policy assessments typically rely on field data and stakeholder perspectives, meaningful insights can also be gained from critical analyses of secondary data sources such as policy documents, evaluation reports, and academic studies.

This analytical review is particularly timely, as Ethiopia ratified a new Education and Training Policy in this year, nearly three decades after the 1994 policy. The new policy aims to address persistent challenges in educational quality, equity, and relevance that have hindered the attainment of previous goals. In this context, examining the achievements and shortcomings of the 1994 ETP is not merely of historical interest, it provides essential lessons that can inform the effective implementation of the 2023 policy and the ongoing education roadmap (2018–2030).

Accordingly, this paper critically reviews Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy, focusing on its formulation, achievements, and challenges, with the ultimate goal of generating actionable lessons for future policy directions. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. Examine the contextual and institutional factors that influenced the formulation of the 1994 Education and Training Policy;
2. Describe the major transformations observed in the education sector following its introduction;
3. Assess the main achievements of the policy based on key performance indicators;
4. Analyze the major challenges encountered during its implementation; and
5. Draw lessons and propose recommendations to guide future policy initiatives, particularly in light of the 2023 Education and Training Policy.

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to conduct an in-depth analytic review of Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP). A qualitative design was primarily used to interpret the policy context and processes through narrative and document analysis, while quantitative data—mainly descriptive statistics such as percentages and enrollment figures—were incorporated to illustrate key educational trends.

The analysis drew upon a wide range of secondary data sources, including official reports from the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs), statistical abstracts, World Bank and UNESCO databases, and peer-reviewed empirical studies. These sources were used to examine the driving forces behind the policy's formulation, its intended objectives, outcomes, and emerging challenges over time.

A review of policy statements, government publications, and evaluation reports helped identify both the pre-1994 systemic challenges and the post-1994 reforms initiated by the government. While the debate over the most appropriate methodology for policy evaluation has persisted since the 1960s, contemporary studies increasingly adopt a “theory of action” approach, linking policy intentions, implementation strategies, and observed outcomes (Weiss, 1998). Following this logic, the present analysis evaluates how far the outcomes of the 1994 ETP align with its initial objectives.

Data analysis followed a descriptive interpretive strategy, integrating statistical trends with thematic interpretation. The researchers also drew on professional experience as teacher educators, offering reflective insights grounded in practical observation. To ensure validity and reliability, data were cross-checked across multiple sources and verified for their relevance, authenticity, and alignment with the research objectives.

This methodological orientation provided a comprehensive understanding of both the achievements and the enduring challenges of the 1994 policy, insights that remain crucial as Ethiopia transitions into the 2023 Education and Training Policy era.

3. Findings

3.1. Rationale for Reform and the Introduction of the 1994 ETP

The formulation of Ethiopia’s 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP) emerged from the need to restructure the education system inherited from the Derg regime and align it with the new government’s developmental and democratic aspirations. While political transition played a role, the reform was not merely an ideological departure from the past; it was also a response to systemic inefficiencies, inequities, and declining educational quality (Challa, 2020). According to the Ministry of Education (2002), the key drivers of reform discussed below;

3.1.1. Limited access

Before 1994, access to education in Ethiopia was among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa. Only about 20% of school-age children were enrolled in primary education (Grades 1–6), and enrollment at the secondary and tertiary levels stood at approximately 15% and 1%, respectively (UNESCO, 2001). As shown in Table 1, the primary school gross enrollment ratio had declined steadily between 1985/86 and 1993/94, dropping from 37.4% to 27.5% (Challa, 2020).

Table 1. Gross Enrollment Ratio at Primary (Grades 1–6) Level, 1985/86–1993/94

Year	Gross Enrollment Ratio	Year	Gross Enrollment Ratio
1985/86	37.4	1990/91	32.7
1986/87	40.8	1991/92	26.5
1987/88	41.9	1992/93	23.1
1988/89	40.3	1993/94	27.5

Source: Challa (2020)

3.1.2. Inequitable Distribution of Educational Services

Prior to 1994, educational opportunities were heavily concentrated in urban centers and largely benefited children from wealthier families. Despite tuition-free schooling, poorer rural communities were often excluded due to limited infrastructure and socio-economic constraints. Regional disparities were significant, with wide gender gaps, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels (Ministry of Education, 2002).

3.1.3. Systemic Inefficiencies

The pre-reform system was also characterized by high repetition and dropout rates, which were mistakenly interpreted as signs of academic rigor. In reality, these indicators reflected inefficiencies in curriculum design, assessment practices, and student support mechanisms (Ministry of Education, 2002).

3.1.4. Lack of Quality and Relevance

The lack of quality and relevance in the education system was another critical issue. There was insufficient focus on science, technology, engineering, and vocational fields, while inadequate laboratory facilities, poor libraries, and limited access to instructional materials hindered learning. The shortage of qualified teachers further exacerbated these problems, leading to declining educational standards (Ministry of Education, 2002).

3.2. The Policy Formulation Process

The 1994 ETP was formulated under the coordination of the Office of the Prime Minister, with implementation led by the Ministry of Education. Around 42 Ethiopian educators and experts, organized into five sub-task forces, were involved in drafting the policy (Tefera, 1996; Martin, Oksanen, & Takala, 2000). These teams represented various ministries and institutions, including education, culture, health, agriculture, and science and technology.

Although some consultations were held with teachers and regional education officers, the process was largely centralized and top-down. Stakeholder participation was limited, and feedback from consultations mainly endorsed the draft policy without substantial revisions (Belay & Melaku, 2019). Critics argue that the formulation process lacked transparency and inclusivity, which may have affected the policy's later implementation (Abebe, 2011; Tefera, 1996).

3.2.1. Major Reforms Introduced by the Policy

The 1994 ETP introduced a series of transformative reforms designed to democratize, decentralize, and modernize the Ethiopian education system (Transitional Government of Ethiopia [TGE], 1994). Its core strategies included:

1. **Expanding Access and Promoting Equity:** The policy sought to achieve universal access to primary education and reduce long-standing disparities by region, gender, and socio-economic background.

2. **Democratization and Decentralization:** For the first time, mother-tongue instruction was officially adopted at the primary level to enhance comprehension and participation. Decentralized management allowed regional governments to design curricula responsive to local contexts.
3. **Ensuring Quality and Relevance:** The ETP emphasized curriculum reform to align education with national development priorities, including the introduction of vocational and technical training, ICT, and civic education.
4. **Improving Efficiency and Accountability:** Measures were introduced to reduce repetition and dropout rates, enhance teacher training, and strengthen the link between education, research, and employment.

Structurally, the ETP reorganized the education system into 8 years of primary (Grades 1–8), 2 years of general secondary (Grades 9–10), and 2 years of preparatory secondary education (Grades 11–12) (Plavgo, 2021). It also opened the door for private education providers, reduced undergraduate degree duration from four to three years, and increased national education spending (Saint, 2004; Yohannes, 2016; Challa, 2020).

However, despite these progressive changes, later policy innovations, such as the “70:30” graduate mix and the Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching (PGDT) program, were met with criticism for their limited impact on quality and teacher preparedness (Olkaba & Duressa, 2020).

3.3. Performance of the Policy as Per Key Indicators

3.3.1. Improving Access to Education

To address challenges of access, the Education and Training Policy (ETP) introduced in 1994 under the EPRDF-led government prioritized expanding educational opportunities at all levels, with particular success in primary education. Since its adoption, five consecutive Education Sector Development Programs (ESDP I–V) have been implemented to operationalize the policy goals. This section draws primarily on data from the Ministry of Education’s annual statistical abstracts at the conclusion of ESDP V (2020) to assess the ETP’s performance relative to its initial objectives.

One of the core goals of the policy was to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) in alignment with the global *Education for All (EFA)* and *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. By 2020, the number of primary schools had increased from 32,048 (ESDP IV) to

41,438, while primary school enrollment grew from 18 million to 23,886,124 students. The Net Enrollment Ratio (NER) for primary education rose dramatically from 27.5% in 1994 to 95.3% in 2019/20 (MoE, 2020). The supply of schools became adequate to ensure the full enrollment of children at the official entry age of seven.

At the secondary level, enrollment also expanded significantly, with an average annual growth rate of 9.4% over the last five years of ESDP V. The number of students increased from about 371,000 in 1994/95 to 3,466,972 by 2020, illustrating a more than ninefold increase and substantial improvement in access to secondary education since the inception of the policy.

Table 2. Net Enrolment Ratio of Different Levels by End of ESDP-V (2020)

No	Indicator	Levels	Remark
		Pre-primary	Grade 1
1	Net Enrolment Ratio (NER)	22.5%	95.5%

Source: Ministry of Education, Education Statistics Annual Abstract (2019/2020)

Despite this impressive progress in expanding primary education, access at the pre-primary and secondary levels remains low. As shown in Table 2, the pre-primary enrollment ratio stands at 22.5%, while the overall secondary enrollment ratio averages 29.0%, far below the desired level (MoE, 2020). This decline in progression from primary to secondary undermines earlier achievements and underscores the need for renewed policy attention to these educational stages.

Teacher education also expanded considerably. There are now 39 Colleges of Teacher Education nationwide, enrolling 132,495 students, 58% male and 42% female (MoE, 2020). Similarly, higher education enrollment has grown markedly, with total enrollment reaching 593,571 by 2013/14 (MoE, 2015). However, this rapid expansion has been accompanied by concerns about educational quality, relevance, and specialization alignment.

3.3.2. Efficiency and Equity in Education

Efficiency indicators, such as repetition, dropout, and survival rates, provide important insight into internal system performance. Although access improved significantly, efficiency outcomes remained suboptimal. The average primary school dropout rate stood at 13.5% in 2019/2020, while the completion rate averaged 70.5%. The Grade 1 dropout rate was particularly high at 21.5%, and the repetition rate for Grades 1–8 stood at 5%, despite

automatic promotion for Grades 1–3 (MoE, 2020). The survival rate to Grade 5 was only 51.5%, indicating that nearly half of students leave school before completing the first cycle.

These findings echo Olkaba’s (2019) observation that primary education wastage remains high, with survival rates (42.9% in 2016) lower than those of comparable low-income African nations. Learning achievement levels are also concerning. According to the *Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)* (USAID, 2018), 37.2% of Grade 2 students could not read a single word from a grade-level story, revealing substantial literacy gaps.

Equity indicators further reveal persistent disparities. Enrollment among students with disabilities remains low, 11.1% at the primary and 2.8% at the secondary level. Female representation in school leadership positions was only 11% in 2019/2020, showing minimal improvement (MoE, 2020). Regional and urban–rural disparities persist: secondary enrollment rates range from 8.4% in Afar (a predominantly pastoralist region) to 78.4% in Addis Ababa.

Schaub (2018) argues that while the ETP emphasized inclusion and diversity, it inadequately addressed structural inequities. Therefore, although access expanded, genuine equity in opportunities and outcomes remains elusive.

3.3.3. Quality and Relevance of Education

Educational quality is a multidimensional construct encompassing teachers’ qualifications, student achievement, instructional materials, and learning environments (Molla, 2014; Challa, 2020). Evaluations by the Ministry of Education and international agencies reveal persistent challenges in maintaining quality despite policy interventions.

The General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP), launched in 2008, sought to address six dimensions of quality. Yet, by 2020, results remained mixed.

Table 3. Selected Performance Indicators of Quality at General Education

No	Indicator	Level	
		Primary	Secondary
1	Pupil–Section Ratio	52.5	64.3
2	Pupil–Teacher Ratio	37.1	27
3	Pupil–Textbook Ratio	3.9	8.8

Source: Ministry of Education, *Education Statistics Annual Abstract (2019/2020)*

Although teacher qualification levels improved, 90.1% of Grades 1–4 teachers now meet minimum standards, only 23.5% of teachers from Grades 1–12 are licensed. EGRA results continue to show poor student performance even after a decade of GEQIP implementation.

At the tertiary level, the rapid expansion of higher education without proportional resource allocation has led to declining quality (Arega, 2016). Scholars (Tuli & Fiorucci, 2012; Poluha, 2001) attribute this decline to poor teacher training, weak supervision, inadequate resources, and insufficient parental and community engagement. Wondemetegn (2016) also reported that secondary school student achievement consistently falls below 50%, with poorly sequenced curricula, complex language, and weak teaching strategies.

Low-quality education at the primary level compromises the entire human capital development pipeline. As the 2023 ETP emphasizes, addressing quality from early childhood through tertiary education is crucial for developing capable, ethical, and employable citizens in the 21st century.

3.3.4. Democratization and Decentralization of the Education System

The 1994 policy introduced mother-tongue instruction as a key democratization measure. By 2013, more than 30 local languages were being used as media of instruction, reflecting progress in promoting linguistic rights and cultural identity (MoE, 2002).

Decentralization also represented a major reform. Before 1994, Ethiopia's education system was highly centralized, resulting in inefficiencies and bureaucratic rigidity. Post-policy reforms devolved authority to regional and local levels, fostering responsive decision-making and improved supervision (UNESCO, 2000).

However, Tefera (1996) cautions that decentralization without adequate institutional capacity can create inconsistencies. Hence, effective decentralization must balance autonomy with accountability, a principle explicitly reiterated in the 2023 ETP.

3.4. Major Challenges Following Implementation

Despite notable progress, several persistent challenges undermine the policy's impact. Learning outcomes remain weak, with many students lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills (Weldesilassie & Woldehanna, 2018). By 2014, nearly 47% of students dropped out before Grade 8, and by 2016, 70% of rural students struggled with simple arithmetic operations.

Academic dishonesty has become institutionalized in higher education, with commercialized “academic services” offering essays and theses for sale, eroding integrity and credibility. Disparities between urban and rural education persist, and private schools consistently outperform public schools (Teshome, 2017).

Pre-primary education remains underdeveloped, with only 45.4% of children aged 4–6 enrolled (MoE, 2020). The reliance on untrained “O-Class” facilitators further undermines foundational learning. Inconsistent enforcement of academic standards, such as minimum grade thresholds for promotion and university entry, has weakened meritocracy.

The National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency (NEAEA), though instrumental in improving evaluation systems, has faced issues related to national exam security and participation in international assessments. Teacher motivation, competence, and professional ethics remain major concerns.

Finally, the envisioned integration of traditional and modern education has been limited in practice, leaving a gap that the 2023 ETP now seeks to bridge through a renewed focus on contextualized, values-driven education.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP) in Ethiopia has yielded a range of outcomes, reflecting both successes and shortcomings based on empirical studies, ministry documents, and reports from international organizations. A notable achievement of the policy is the significant expansion of educational access across all levels, evidenced by the proliferation of schools, colleges, and universities. Additionally, the policy's efforts to decentralize educational organization and management, coupled with increased funding for the sector, are recognized as positive developments. The introduction of mother tongue instruction at the primary school level, despite criticism from some researchers such as Demeke (2011), is also considered a notable accomplishment. Moreover, the policy's encouragement of private sector investment in education has been highlighted as a contributing factor to its success.

Many of the current social, economic, and political leaders in Ethiopia are products of this policy, demonstrating its widespread impact. The emphasis on vocational education has created job opportunities for middle-level graduates, and the policy has also led to the emergence of dedicated professionals in health and agriculture. Chicoine (2016) even

attributes the expansion of free primary education to a reduction in fertility rates and improved use of contraception. While acknowledging these achievements, it is crucial to address the policy's critical issues candidly to extract lessons for future initiatives. A balanced, honest, and ethical examination of the policy is necessary.

Critics have highlighted shortcomings from the policy's inception, including insufficient stakeholder involvement in its preparation (Tefera, 1996; Challa, 2020). The top-down approach of the policy, which failed to incorporate input from key stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and students, has been a point of contention. A significant adverse outcome has been the decline in the quality of education, as evidenced by reports from the Ministry of Education and various empirical studies. The deterioration in educational quality manifests in various societal issues, including governance challenges and widespread corruption. The dissatisfaction with services provided by educational, medical, and security institutions can be traced back to deficiencies in the quality of education received by civil servants.

Moreover, the qualities of newly constructed infrastructure and ongoing societal issues related to peaceful coexistence have been linked to the actions of the country's elite. Protests by graduates concerning exit exams and the Certificate of Competence (COC) exams further underscore the need for immediate action to ensure educational quality and fulfill its role in nation-building. Challenges such as inefficiency, equity disparities (rural-urban, public-private, central-peripheral, gender, special needs), cheating and academic dishonesty, substandard institutions, educational assessment standardization, teacher development, low community participation, and increased politicization of education require urgent attention. In conclusion, while the 1994 ETP has produced mixed outcomes, it offers valuable lessons for future policy development. The recent changes to the policy are timely, though perhaps overdue, and future policy initiatives could benefit from the insights and recommendations outlined in this analysis.

5. Recommendations and Implications for Future Policy

The findings of this retrospective analysis reveal that Ethiopia's 1994 Education and Training Policy produced commendable progress in expanding access and promoting equity, yet persistent challenges in quality, relevance, and efficiency continue to undermine system performance. In light of these insights and in alignment with the strategic priorities of the 2023 Education and Training Policy (ETP 2023), future policy initiatives must prioritize the

comprehensive enhancement of educational quality across all levels. This requires ensuring that inputs such as teacher competence, instructional materials, and school infrastructure, as well as processes including teaching-learning practices, are coherently aligned with desired outcomes, such as student achievement, employability, and citizenship competencies. Strengthening quality assurance mechanisms through continuous monitoring, classroom-based assessments, and systematic feedback loops is essential to translate policy ambitions into tangible results.

Assessment and evaluation systems should be restructured to reflect authentic, continuous, and competency-based assessments. The National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency should play a central role in ensuring the reliability and validity of national examinations, while also integrating formative and digital assessment practices. In addition, accountability frameworks must be reinforced at all governance levels—federal, regional, and school—to promote evidence-based decision-making, equitable resource allocation, and improved service delivery.

The quality of education also depends on the ethical and professional standards of teachers. Policy implementation must strengthen teacher education by establishing robust licensing systems, continuous professional development programs, and ethics-based evaluation mechanisms. Emphasizing integrity and accountability in the teaching profession is critical for addressing academic dishonesty, enhancing teacher motivation, and institutionalizing a culture of responsibility within schools and higher education institutions. Complementary to these efforts, meaningful parental, community, and stakeholder engagement is essential for successful decentralization and inclusive education. Institutionalizing participatory governance mechanisms, such as school boards and parent-teacher associations, can enhance accountability, foster equity, and ensure that educational programs are culturally and contextually relevant.

Integrating indigenous knowledge with science, technology, and innovation remains an important area for reform. Aligning curriculum and pedagogy to combine local knowledge systems, ethics, and national values with modern technological skills will foster creativity, contextual learning, and sustainable development competencies. Attention must also be paid to addressing disparities between urban and rural areas and between public and private schools. Targeted interventions, including differentiated funding, teacher deployment

incentives, and infrastructure development, are necessary to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners.

Finally, strengthening the link between research and policymaking is critical for the sustainability of educational reforms. Collaboration between universities, research institutes, and education bureaus should be enhanced to provide evidence-based guidance for policy formulation and implementation. Longitudinal and impact-oriented studies focusing on teacher competencies, curriculum relevance, governance, and financing mechanisms will provide actionable insights to inform continuous improvement of the education system. The lessons drawn from the 1994 ETP highlight that policy success depends not only on visionary goals but also on inclusive design, effective implementation, and systematic evaluation. As Ethiopia implements the 2023 Education and Training Policy, it must build on past achievements while addressing persistent structural weaknesses, pursuing a balanced reform agenda that combines expansion with excellence, decentralization with accountability, and modernization with cultural rootedness. This holistic approach is essential to realize an equitable, resilient, and globally competitive education system capable of driving national transformation in the decades ahead.

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