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From the Editors

Educational Planning is dedicated to advancing the ideal of high-quality education for all by fostering rigorous scholarly dialogue on the improvement of education systems, the enhancement of educational outcomes, and the development of effective and sustainable educational policies worldwide. In this respect, the journal serves as an international academic platform that highlights the central role of educational planning and policy in educational reform, equity, and sustainability. For more than fifty years, *Educational Planning* has been published continuously and has made significant contributions to both the theoretical foundations and practical applications of educational planning through the dissemination of high-quality research. At the journal's inception in 1975, its founding editor, Dr. Cicely Watson (Department of Educational Planning, OISE), articulated a clear and forward-looking vision, noting that *the journal would publish scholarship on both the theory and practice of educational planning, including case studies and interdisciplinary contributions from fields such as the economics and sociology of education, demography, urban and institutional planning, operations research, educational research, and applied mathematics—domains of direct relevance to educational planners*. This interdisciplinary and practice-oriented mission continues to guide the journal today.

On this occasion, as the new editors of the journal starting with this issue, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to our former editors—*Dr. Cicely Watson* (University of Toronto), *Dr. Robert Beach* (University of Alabama), *Dr. Bill McInerney* (Purdue University), *Dr. Mark Baron* (University of South Dakota), *Dr. Rudi Mattai* (State University of New York), *Dr. Linda LeMasters* (George Washington University), and *Dr. Tak Cheung Chan* (Kennesaw State University)—whose dedication and contributions since 1973 have played a vital role in bringing the journal to where it is today. Without their committed efforts and valuable support, our journal could not have reached its current standing through the contributions of our volunteer association members and editors alone.

The current issue brings together a diverse collection of scholarly contributions authored by researchers from a wide range of national and institutional contexts. The articles address timely and significant topics, including critical perspectives on lifelong learning; classroom-level factors influencing student achievement; women's leadership in education; strategic planning and school quality improvement; university–community integration and the enhancement of higher education quality; challenges in inclusive education; and the role of planning in improving school performance. Taken together, these studies reflect the journal's commitment to examining educational planning through both global and context-sensitive lenses.

Finally, we wish to express our deepest appreciation to *Professor Tak Cheung Chan*, who served as Editor of *Educational Planning* from 2012 to 2025 and made exceptional contributions to both the journal and the International Society for Educational Planning (ISEP). Professor Chan's leadership, mentorship, and scholarly guidance have played a pivotal role in strengthening the journal's academic quality and international visibility. His impact on the professional development and scholarly productivity of colleagues worldwide is both profound and enduring. We wish him continued success and fulfillment in the years ahead. *Educational Planning* remains firmly committed to serving as a global forum for the exchange of knowledge, research, and best practices in educational planning.

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Fast Enough to Matter: A Hybrid, Delphi-Informed Methodology for Inclusive and Accelerated Strategic Planning

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores whether a hybrid Delphi-informed methodology can accelerate strategic planning while maintaining broad participation and transparency in higher education. The process was designed around five core operating principles (speed, agility, inclusion, timely transparency, accountability) addressing traditional planning limitations. The hybrid approach combined iterative surveys, all-inclusive forums, and an interactive website for rapid feedback and shared sense-making. The strategic plan was completed in five months. Faculty/staff participation averaged 63% (SD = 13%, 95% CI: 43-83%) across four surveys, achieving 84-98% consensus on final priorities. Student survey participation (12%, n=162/1,350) was lower, though alternative methods supplemented input. The process demonstrates that speed and participation need not compete. Findings reflect a single case with specific enabling conditions (size, governance, resources), limiting generalizability. Low student engagement highlights needs for differentiated strategies. Multi-site research is warranted. Accelerated, participatory planning is achievable in higher education with appropriate conditions. While not generalizable, process documentation can inform adaptation at similar institutions. This study demonstrates how accelerated planning can align with participatory principles, contributing to debates on strategic planning effectiveness in today's complex higher education landscape.

KEYWORDS: strategic planning, Delphi method, higher education, culture change, innovation1.0

Introduction

Higher education is facing unprecedented volatility across political, economic, technological, and social domains, threatening both its core values and foundational principles of institutional operations (Habeeb & Eyupoglu, 2024; Lemoine & Richardson, 2020). Among these challenges, institutions must navigate intensified public skepticism, unstable funding streams, shrinking college-aged populations, and mounting pressure to integrate rapidly emerging technologies (Goldman et al., 2022; Varalakshmi, 2024). Compounding these pressures is the rise of nontraditional learning providers, the continued proliferation of online education, and alternative credentialing pathways, all of which influence student expectations, enrollment behavior and, as such, a core revenue stream (Usoh & Preston, 2017).

Strategic planning is a proven and critical process for high-performance and sustained success (Immordino et al., 2016); research has established links between strategic planning and institutional sustainability, educational quality and innovation (Sanches et al., 2023, Bergeron, et al. 2017; Grover et al., 2016). Yet, traditional methodologies present significant challenges in today's dynamic environment, including long timelines, rigid committee structures, and stakeholder fatigue (Brown & James, 2023). Historically, these challenges have been viewed as an a acceptable cost for institutions pursuing the greater good, but they have become untenable in today's environment (Baporikar, 2021; D. Varalakshmi, 2024; Howes, 2018). Higher education requires structures and processes that are far more agile and responsive to the rapid onslaught of changes impacting higher education. Emerging approaches offer promising alternatives, but they often fail to increase speed, sustain engagement, or build consensus (Bryson et al., 2021; Castillo et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, a large Health Professions School (to be called "The School"), situated within an R1 public university in the northeast, sought to maintain the rigor of traditional methods of strategic planning while significantly accelerating the pace and levels of engagement. The design centered on a new operating paradigm designed to address the needs of the current environment and articulated through five core principles: speed, agility, inclusion, timely transparency, and accountability. The Delphi-informed method (Maxey & Kezar, 2016) was chosen as the central framework, leveraging its ability to elicit informed opinions from varied and dispersed stakeholders while minimizing the influence of dominant personalities, hierarchical structures, and complex group dynamics common in academia (Doyle & Brady, 2018).

This case study contributes to the strategic planning literature by reframing accelerated planning as a design challenge rather than an inherent tradeoff between speed and participation. Drawing on a principle-driven, hybrid Delphi–informed approach, the study illustrates how deliberate process design, particularly the use of explicit operating principles, parallel engagement modalities, and timely transparency, can enable accelerated planning while strengthening inclusion, legitimacy, and shared ownership. The following sections situate the School's model within current scholarship, details the methodology and preliminary outcomes, and offers guidance for others seeking to retain the benefits of strategic planning within a timeframe appropriate for the current pace of change.

<h1 style="text-align:center">Literature Review: Past, Present, Future</h1>

Traditional Methodology

Higher education institutions have long used strategic planning to define mission and vision, set priorities, and allocate resources. However, traditional approaches have been subject to sustained critique due to their long, linear processes; rigid committee-driven governance structures; and limited engagement of faculty, staff, and other key stakeholders (Bolden, 2011).

Lengthy Timelines. Comprehensive strategic planning often spans 18 months to 3 years, by which point institutional and external conditions may have shifted significantly (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025; Bryson, 2018a; Snyder, 2015a). In volatile environments, such delays risk producing plans that are outdated upon release. Bryson et al. (2018) note a prevailing perception that extended timelines are required to achieve substance and thoroughness. However, the understandable desire for thoroughness can also result in extended deliberation prone to burnout and wish lists of initiatives that lack strategic focus and exceed institutional capacity (Stensaker, 2018). These plans frequently encounter implementation challenges due to weak resource alignment, unclear performance measures, or limited integration with existing organizational structures (Ferraro & Salas, 2025).

Committee Structures. Committee-heavy governance structures are equally well-intended as a signal of inclusivity and strength. Yet, these committees frequently rely on a small subset of faculty and administrators who are repeatedly asked to serve (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). In many cases, committees reinforce existing hierarchies and dysfunctional group dynamics rather than amplifying diverse perspectives ((Morimoto & Guillaume, 2018; Stukalina, 2017). This limited concentration of participation leaves many stakeholders disengaged, contributes to fatigue, and can undermine perceptions of legitimacy. Combined, these process characteristics have the potential to limit creativity, narrow input, and effectiveness of results (Maxey & Kezar, 2016).

Stakeholder Engagement. Traditional planning models also struggle to sustain stakeholder engagement and trust over time (Falqueto et al., 2020a). Lengthy timelines paired with limited communication often foster skepticism and result in the with the planning process itself being perceived as bureaucratic and disconnected from the reality of key constituents (Bryson et al., 2018; Morimoto & Guillaume, 2018). Kezar and Holcombe (2017) describe "planning fatigue" as the result of substantial work being done without visible progress, eroding confidence and participation.

Agile and Participatory Methodology

In response to these shortcomings, scholars increasingly advocate for approaches that are more agile, participatory, and outcomes oriented (Table 1). In rapidly changing environments, universities require planning mechanisms that can adjust quickly to the changing world and its' impact on higher education (Williams, 2021).

Agility. One stream of literature highlights the need for agility and adaptability. Agile approaches emphasize shorter cycles, feedback loops, and continuous review. This positions strategic planning as a living rather than static process (Bryson, 2018; Castillo & Roberts, 2024; Crosby & Bryson, 2018).

Iteration. A second body of work includes frameworks such implementation science and distributive leadership, that emphasize iteration, broad inclusion, and responsiveness as pathways to success and sustainability (Heinzen et al., 2020a; Holcombe et al., 2023). This shift reflects growing recognition that perceived legitimacy and buy-in depends on process design as well as final content of the documents produced. Scholars have also emphasized the potential of design thinking methods to answer the challenges faced in strategic planning (Abulibdeh et al., 2025; Magistretti et

al., 2022; Plattner, 2010). These methods are encouraging institutions to continuously test and adapt as a core process principle. In addition, this body of knowledge places stakeholder experience at the center of the planning process. Applied in higher education, such approaches promote creativity and experimentation while aligning strategy with community needs (Clark, 2017).

Transparency. Finally, transparency and accountability have emerged as essential features of contemporary planning (A. J. Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Ruben et al., 2023). Limited and delayed communication in traditional models often undermines trust, while real-time transparency via dashboards, planning websites, and timely dissemination of results, enhances legitimacy and reinforces accountability. Collectively, this scholarship signals a justified shift from the more hierarchical, rigidly designed planning processes to those that are dynamic, responsive, and transparent.

Table 1. Traditional vs. Agile Strategic Planning Approaches in Higher Education.

Dimension	Traditional	Agile/Participatory
Timeline	Traditional approaches are characterized by long, inflexible cycles (often 1–3 years) and risk becoming outdated by completion. (Bonomi Savignon & Costumato, 2024)	Agile planning relies on short, iterative cycles, often just weeks or months, ensuring plans stay relevant and responsive. (Gemino et al., 2021)
Governance Structure	Hierarchical, structured governance, with reliance on recurring committees and top-down authority. (Serrador & Pinto, 2015)	Distributive leadership and flatter governance structures allow for adaptive, flexible participation. (Bolden, 2011; Rasnacis & Berzisa, 2017)
Stakeholder Engagement	Limited engagement, typically confined to mandatory consultations with key stakeholders. (Shah, 2012)	Continuous, broad stakeholder engagement elevates diverse voices and adapts to feedback. (Falqueto et al., 2020b)
Outputs	Produces comprehensive but static reports and lengthy lists of initiatives, which may lack prioritization. (Snyder, 2015b)	Results in focused, prioritized, and measurable outputs aligned with feedback and emergent needs. (Rasnacis & Berzisa, 2017)
Implementation	Emphasizes detailed up-front planning and linear, resource-driven implementation measured at the end. (Gemino et al., 2021)	Supports incremental, iterative implementation with real-time feedback and adaptive course correction. (Sanches, 2025)
Trust & Legitimacy	Trust and legitimacy stem mainly from authority and tradition, sometimes appearing inflexible. (Shah, 2012)	Builds trust through transparency, visible progress, and ongoing collaboration. (Moats et al., 2023)

The Delphi Method in Higher Education

Among participatory approaches, the Delphi method is widely recognized as effective in building consensus (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Developed at the RAND Corporation in the 1950s, Delphi relies on iterative rounds of anonymous input to surface collective knowledge and areas of agreement. Over time, the method has been adapted for use across diverse fields, including healthcare and education, where it has demonstrated value in eliciting informed input while reducing the influence of hierarchy and groupthink (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Delphi methodology is defined by three core features: anonymity, iteration, and structured feedback. Anonymous input encourages candor and reduces the influence of authority figures (Felix & Castro, 2018), while multiple rounds allow participants to refine their responses over time. Synthesizing and sharing results after each round creates effective feedback loops that highlight areas of convergence and divergence (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). Iteration also fosters collective learning, as participants adjust their views in response to group feedback (Rowe & Wright, 2011).

In higher education, Delphi has been applied to curriculum development, accreditation processes, and faculty consensus-building, demonstrating its adaptability in complex organizational settings (Hughes et al., 2018). However, critiques remain. Extended or poorly timed Delphi rounds can contribute to survey fatigue and declining response rates (Hasson et al., 2025). Effective application also requires skilled facilitation and careful instrument design (Furtado et al., 2024), challenges that are particularly salient in institution-wide strategic planning contexts characterized by time constraints and competing demands.

A Hybrid Delphi-Informed Framework

To address these challenges, this study employed a principle-driven, hybrid Delphi-informed planning framework (Figure 1). Rather than applying Delphi in isolation, the framework integrates core Delphi features within a broader process architecture intentionally designed to address tensions between speed, participation, and legitimacy. As shown in Figure 1, the hybrid framework synthesizes contributions from four methodological traditions: anonymous iterative consensus-building (Delphi), broad stakeholder inclusion and dialogue (participatory planning), short cycles with rapid feedback (agile), and concurrent implementation infrastructure (implementation science).

Five core operating principles defined but the school - speed, agility, inclusion, timely transparency, and accountability - formed the heart of the approach. Rather than methodology dictating process, principles dictated which elements to adopt and how to combine them. Four design innovations enabled this synthesis: (1) leveraging existing organizational structures rather than creating new committees, (2) employing parallel engagement streams to accommodate diverse participation preferences, (3) rapid result dissemination (3-10 days) to maintain transparency and momentum, and (4) principles-driven adaptation allowing real-time course correction while maintaining rigor.

Figure 1. Principle-Driven, Hybrid Delphi–Informed Strategic Planning Framework.
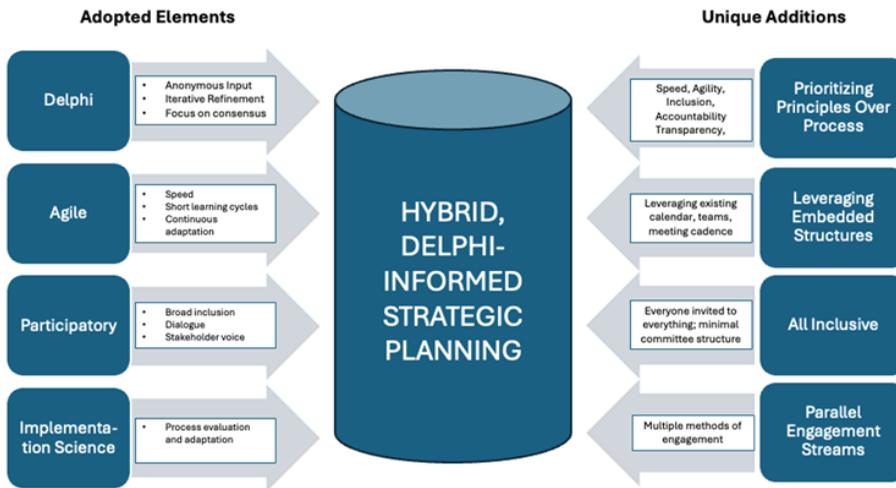
This figure presents the conceptual framework guiding the School's hybrid, Delphi-informed strategic planning process. Rather than depicting a linear or method-pure sequence, the framework illustrates how **explicit operating principles** govern iterative cycles of stakeholder input, synthesis, feedback, and decision-making. Multiple engagement modalities operate in parallel to broaden participation while maintaining momentum. **Timely transparency functions as an active feedback mechanism**, reinforcing trust, legitimacy, and sustained engagement throughout the planning process. Together, these design features demonstrate how accelerated planning can be achieved without sacrificing inclusion or cultural alignment.

Gaps and Contributions of this Case

Several gaps remain in the literature regarding effective alternatives to traditional strategic planning methodologies. First, while conceptual frameworks for agile and participatory planning are increasingly discussed, relatively few published case studies document their implementation, leaving limited insight into how such processes unfold in practice (Bryson, 2018). Second, many studies emphasize the quality of final planning documents rather than examining the planning process itself as a meaningful outcome (Biondi & Russo, 2022; Moats et al., 2023). Finally, the application of hybrid Delphi-informed approaches to institution-wide strategic planning in higher education remains underexplored.

This case study begins to address these gaps by documenting a process that produced a comprehensive five-year strategic plan in under six months within a higher education setting. It demonstrates how a compressed, participatory approach can support timely decision-making while sustaining high levels of faculty and staff engagement. By sharing process design choices, lessons learned, and practical tools, the study offers an adaptable model for institutions seeking to retain the benefits of strategic planning within increasingly dynamic environments.

Methodology

Case Study Design

Case study methodology (Biondi & Russo, 2022) is particularly well-suited for examining application of research-informed methodologies to real-world processes against the backdrop of organizational context and environmental realities. Building on the literature, this study employed a single-institution case study to examine the design and implementation of a new strategic planning process at Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP). The specific objectives of the case study are to assess whether a compressed, participatory process could achieve timely and high-quality results as well as a positive impact on organizational culture. The research questions guiding this inquiry include the following:

1. How effective is a Delphi-informed, participatory planning model in accelerating the strategic planning process?
2. To what extent does the process enhance stakeholder engagement, trust, and consensus?
3. What lessons can be drawn for replication in other higher education contexts?

Institutional Setting

This case study takes place within a large health professions school (the "School") at a public, R1, university in the northeast United States. The School's prior strategic plan expired in 2020, and efforts to launch a new strategic plan were impacted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional delay came with a shift in senior leadership. As such, the School did not take up strategic planning until a permanent leader was recruited and took office in the fall of 2023.

With the vast changes that had taken place 2020, the School needed a new plan that aligned with a reality not imagined prior to 2020. Post-pandemic shifts in healthcare delivery, workforce demands, institutional restructuring, and the rapidly changing political, economic, and social climate was new and complex ground to navigate. Additionally, new leadership needed to align the School's priorities with those recently established by its parent unit. For support, the School engaged the Office of Organizational Leadership, an internal consulting team that partners with academic units across the university to advance leadership and organizational effectiveness, including strategic planning efforts. This was especially important to ensure alignment between the School and the larger university community.

Core Operating Principles

The process was anchored in five core operating principles that reflected a new paradigm for institutional planning. These principles were not theoretical; they actively shaped decisions about everything from governance structure and process design to data collection to communication.

The five core operating principles were:

1. **Speed** – to ensure timely relevance in a volatile environment.

2. **Agility** – to allow for learning, adaptation, and course correction.

3. **Inclusion** – to elevate diverse faculty, staff, and student voices.

4. **Timely Transparency** – to build institutional trust and promote real-time engagement.

5. **Accountability** – to anchor the process in measurable follow-through.

Operationalizing these principles led to some early decisions that were very different from past strategic planning efforts: a minimalistic planning and governance structure; a commitment to leverage the current academic calendar and other recurring meetings to minimize delays and fatigue; use of a Delphi-informed survey process; commitment to a new level of transparency with rapid and broad release of results. These elements reflected our early commitment to operating principles that aligned with contemporary best practices (Crosby & Bryson, 2018; Ruben et al., 2023).

Planning Structure

The School implemented a minimalist planning structure organized around four core groups (Figure 2). This structure embodied the principles of distributive leadership (Bryson, 2018) and adaptive governance, dispersing responsibility across overlapping groups while maintaining a clear operational and decision-making structure. Additionally, by leveraging internal expertise and embedding committee work into established meeting times, the School reduced start-up delays often associated with team formation and calendaring, common challenges associated with traditional methodologies (Bonomi Savignon & Costumato, 2024).

Figure 2. Planning Structure.
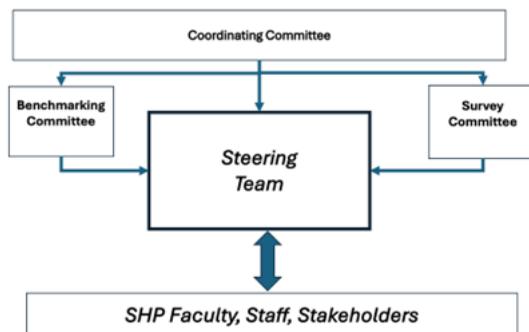
The **Steering Team**, chaired by the Dean and populated by the Vice-Dean, Associate Deans, Department Chairs, and Administrative leads, served as the primary advisory and decision-making body. The team was an extension of a currently established leadership group had an established weekly meeting cadence and one meeting a month became devoted to strategic planning. This group functioned as the link between all committees and the faculty and staff. In line with shared governance practices (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2020), the Steering Team interpreted survey and focus group data, refined the planning process as needed, and promoted alignment across academic and administrative units. While its meetings were traditionally held on-line, the single meeting a month devoted to strategic planning was held in-person to encourage strong participation, productive dialogue, and decision-making.

The **Benchmarking Committee** was tasked with gathering and synthesizing external environmental scans. This group was also an established administrative team including leadership from operations, finance, and enrollment management. Given their already established meeting schedule, strong working relationships, and deep knowledge base, the team was quickly able to pull together the necessary analysis. Data included comparative strategic plans from peer and aspirational institutions, labor market trends, and regional workforce demand projections. This committee's work reflected a commitment to environmental scanning and issue analysis as central

elements of strategic management in higher education (Fumasoli, 2020), and their efforts helped to ensure a data-informed approach to planning and decision making.

The **Survey Committee** included two members of the Steering team and two faculty members with skills in survey design and analysis. These faculty brought expertise and credibility to the process, helping the committee to understand and apply best practices in data collection and analysis with mixed-methods research (Creswell & Plano, 2017) and participatory design (Barr & McNamara, 2022; Heinzen et al., 2020b), particularly in capturing the voices of all faculty, staff, and students. Surveys captured both quantitative (e.g., Likert-based preferences for mission and vision statements) and qualitative data (e.g., open-ended insights on future directions). Committee members collaborated on instrument design, administration logistics, and analysis.

The **Coordinating Committee** was made up of the two steering team members and two staff members that supported project management and logistics. This committee served as the operational backbone of the process. This group managed internal logistics, scheduled committee meetings, drafted institutional communications, and maintained planning infrastructure. It also developed and monitored the planning timeline, launched the internal strategic planning website, and supported consistent stakeholder engagement across phases. By focusing on coherence and continuity, the Coordinating Committee upheld the agile governance approach advocated in recent higher education planning models (Sanches, 2025).

Participants

The School's entire faculty, staff, and students were invited to participate in surveys as well as one or more live components of the planning process. The common perception of faculty and staff was the same people were consistently "cherry picked" for high-level initiatives, leaving a majority unengaged with no substantive opportunity to influence outcomes. As such, the survey sample and invitations to open forums were all inclusive, without regard to hierarchy, rank, or tenure. At the time of planning, the School employed approximately 145 full-time faculty and 100 staff and a student body of more than1,300 in undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Each of these groups was considered a critical stakeholder that should be engaged and integrated into our planning process. External stakeholders – such as health system partners, leadership in other health sciences schools, employers - were addressed through targeted one-on-one or small group discussions rather than the survey process as described in this case study. A robust communication and outreach plan supported by marketing staff encouraged participation. This included a combination of email, in-person and zoom meetings, and dedicated communication platforms including digital screens, web pages, and newsletters.

Data Collection

Five core surveys were administered over a five-month period, each one built on insights gained from prior survey. Survey instruments blended scaled and open-ended items, allowing both quantitative aggregation and qualitative insight. A separate student survey was administered, focusing on academic experience, program satisfaction, and institutional climate.

Table 2. Survey Participation and Response Rates.

Round	Survey Purpose	Respondent Group	Sample Size	Response Rate	95% CI
Survey 1	Mission, vision, and values (initial input	Faculty & Staff	245	80%	74.5%-84.7%
Survey 2	Refined mission, vision, and draft priorities	Faculty & Staff	245	68%	62.0%-73.6%
Survey 3	Confirm priorities; draft goals	Faculty & Staff	245	47%	40.8%-53.2%
Survey 4	Confirm goals and draft initiatives	Faculty & Staff	245	57%	50.7%-63.1%
Survey 5	Student Survey	Students	1350	12%	8.5%-16.7%

All surveys were administered using Qualtrics, a secure, cloud-based survey platform approved by the university. Each survey was distributed via institutional email with reminders sent twice per survey cycle. Survey links were also provided in standard department and leadership meetings and links were also posted on the dedicated planning website. Survey administration windows were short (typically 7-10 days), and the surveys themselves were kept brief (goal was to complete in under 10 minutes) to encourage response, minimize participant fatigue, and maintain momentum. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with no incentives offered. Communications emphasized the purpose of the strategic planning process, including how the data would be used, and how participants could review and further discuss the results. Survey links were unique to each round, and data were not linked across surveys.

Surveys were complemented by open forums and town halls in a consistent and published cadence as illustrated in Figure 3. The dashed line isolates the process that was repeated multiple times to gain clarity and consensus. At least one live forum was held for faculty, staff, and students in each survey round, offering an opportunity to discuss survey findings in real time and explore areas of convergence and divergence. Department chairs also integrated planning discussions into standing departmental meetings, which helped sustain momentum and allowed local contexts to surface. Notes from these meetings were recorded and fed into the central analysis.

Figure 3. Hybrid Implementation.
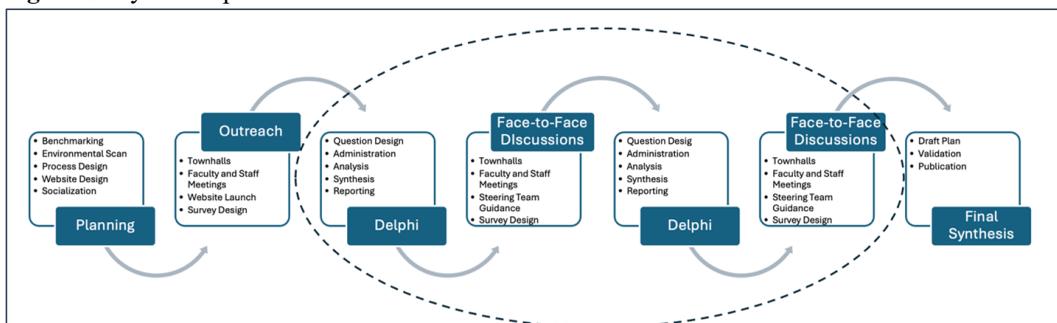
In addition, a dedicated planning website served as the primary hub for communication and transparency. It housed survey reports, draft priorities and goals, and an evolving timeline of activities. Each survey's results were summarized within one week of closing and posted to the website, accompanied by email announcements to faculty, staff, and students. This rhythm created a predictable cycle of input and feedback, demonstrating that contributions were heard and acted upon. Together, these strategies blended data collection with communication and engagement. They provided multiple avenues to raise the stakeholder voice and created an iterative feedback loop that reinforced learning, transparency, and accountability. As the literature suggests, such practices are essential for building legitimacy and trust in strategic planning processes (Graves & Erickson, 2024; Kim et al., 2024).

Data Analysis

Data collected in the surveys were analyzed by faculty members experienced in survey design as well as qualitative and quantitative measurement. For the Likert scale data, descriptive statistics provided the frequency and percentages for each question. Questions where the combined value of "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" were above 70% were deemed to have reached consensus for the purposes of this process. The open-ended questions in Surveys 1-3 were analyzed using conventional content analysis within NVivo 14 (Hsieh, 2005). In these surveys the qualitative data were coded and categorized first by a qualitative researcher and then confirmed by at least one additional member of the research team.

For Survey 4, given the volume of responses and the time-sensitive nature of the planning process, we used ChatGPT-4.0 to assist with initial thematic categorization of open-ended responses. The AI tool was prompted to identify recurring themes and group similar comments. All AI-generated categories and theme assignments were then reviewed, validated, and refined by at least two members of the research. This validation process ensured that reported themes authentically represented participant input rather than AI inference. We acknowledge that AI-assisted qualitative analysis is an emerging methodological approach that requires transparency and validation (Xiao et al., 2024). Our hybrid approach, leveraging AI for efficiency while maintaining human oversight for validity, reflects a pragmatic response to the tension between speed and rigor in applied organizational research. Survey results were reported within 3-10 days of survey closure. Releasing results in this way allowed stakeholders to see how their input shaped subsequent iterations of the survey and ultimately the plan itself, strengthening trust, engagement, and buy-in.

Results

Survey Participation

Across the first four survey rounds targeting faculty and staff, response rates averaged 63% (SD = 13%) across four survey rounds, ranging from 47% to 80% (Table 2). Response was highest in Survey 1 at 80 percent (95% CI: 74.5–84.7%), declined to 68 percent in Survey 2 (95% CI: 62.0–73.6%) and 47 percent in Survey 3 (95% CI: 40.8–53.2%), and then partially rebounded to 57 percent in Survey 4 (95% CI: 50.7–63.1%). This mid-process dip followed by a recovery is consistent with iterative survey designs (Hasson et al, 2000). Confidence intervals reflect response rates only and do not represent dispersion of substantive responses.

Figure 4. Survey Response Rates with 95% CI.
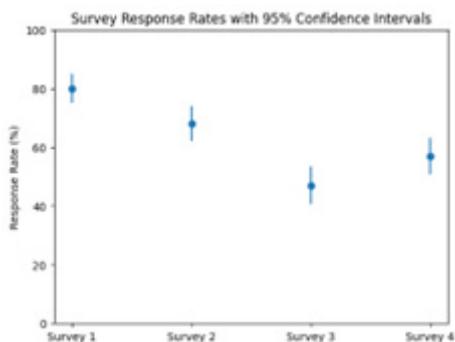
Consensus on Strategic Priorities and Goals

Integration of quantitative survey data with qualitative input from live forums resulted in the identification of four strategic priorities. Each priority was supported by a set of goals and objectives refined through successive survey rounds and Steering Team review. Faculty and staff consensus on the final proposed priorities, goals, and objectives ranged from 84 to 98 percent. These levels exceeded both the study's predefined consensus threshold of 70 percent and the 80 percent benchmark commonly cited in Delphi-based studies to indicate strong agreement (Rowe, 2011).

Table 3. Consensus of Faculty and Staff.

Strategic Priority	Focus of Related Goals	Range Across Priority Goals
Excellence in Education	Advance pedagogy, clinical placements, interprofessional learning	86–97%
Advancement of Research and Scholarship	Expand research infrastructure, faculty mentorship, grant activity	84–97%
Building Healthy, Inclusive Communities	Strengthen student support, workplace wellness, community engagement	84–97%
Stewardship and Sustainability	Enhance financial models, portfolio review, institutional reputation	92–98%

These outcomes demonstrate that a hybrid, Delphi-informed methodology, reinforced by engagement across multiple channels, can generate consensus on core priorities in a compressed timeframe.

Student Perspectives

Survey 5, administered to students, yielded a response rate of 12 percent. This markedly lower level of engagement indicates that the survey-based approach effective with faculty and staff did not translate successfully to the student population. In response, the planning team supplemented survey data with in-person discussions involving student association leaders and informal conversations in student spaces. While these inputs were not captured through formal survey metrics, they provided

additional contextual perspectives that informed refinement of priorities and objectives. This divergence in response patterns underscores the importance of adapting engagement strategies to the characteristics and constraints of different stakeholder groups within institution-wide planning processes.

Discussion

Key Themes

This study examined whether a hybrid, Delphi-informed methodology could accelerate strategic planning while addressing well-documented limitations of traditional approaches. The findings suggest that such an approach is feasible and effective under specific design conditions. The School's strategic plan was developed in under six months, with consensus levels exceeding commonly cited thresholds for Delphi studies (Rowe & Wright, 2011). In this case, accelerated progress was achieved alongside sustained faculty and staff participation.

The compressed timeline indicates that accelerated planning may be feasible when supported by structured consensus-building tools and intentional process design. In contrast to traditional strategic planning efforts that often span multiple years and risk becoming outdated before completion, this approach enabled timely convergence on shared priorities. These findings align with prior research advocating for agile planning models that treat strategy as adaptive rather than static (Cervone, 2014; Sanches, 2025). By prioritizing explicit operating principles rather than rigid procedural steps, the planning process remained responsive to participant feedback and evolving conditions. Participation patterns further suggest that the hybrid, Delphi-informed methodology can expand involvement beyond the committee-based structures typical of traditional planning. Open access to surveys and live forums provided multiple avenues for contribution without reliance on hierarchical representation, reflecting calls in the literature for distributive leadership and inclusive governance structures (Aysola et al., 2018; Bolden, 2011; Hughes et al., 2018). Although limited to a single institutional context, these findings point to the potential of such models to broaden engagement while maintaining decision-making efficiency.

The communication and engagement strategy also played a significant role in sustaining participation throughout the process. Timely sharing of survey results, interim decisions, and next steps appeared to reinforce transparency and credibility, contributing to continued engagement across survey rounds. Prior research identifies transparency and visible progress as important factors in maintaining stakeholder trust during periods of organizational change (Cervone, 2014; Graves & Erickson, 2024; Law, 2023). In this case, communication was integrated as a core design element rather than a peripheral activity, helping to mitigate planning fatigue and sustain momentum.

Contribution to the Literature

This case contributes to the strategic planning literature in three interrelated ways. First, it challenges the prevailing assumption that speed and participation are an inherent tradeoff. The findings suggest that this tension is not structural but rather design dependent. This extends existing work on agile governance and adaptive planning in higher education (Bryson, 2018; Williams, 2021). Second, this study extends the application of the Delphi method beyond its traditional use as a consensus-measurement tool by demonstrating its utility as an institution-wide planning infrastructure, leveraging iterative cycles to inform value-added adaptations in real-time (Maxey & Kezar, 2016; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Third, the case reframes strategic planning as a cultural intervention rather than solely a technical exercise. Rather than treating operating principles as symbolic, the process embedded them as active design constraints and used iterative process adaptation to sustain alignment between stated principles and planning practice. This was effective

in shaping the stakeholder experience and perceptions of legitimacy throughout the results. These outcomes are frequently cited as prerequisites for successful planning but are rarely examined as products of planning methodology (Biondi & Russo, 2022; Moats et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

This case offers a practical model for higher education institutions seeking to reimagine strategic planning as a more participatory, agile, and outcomes-driven practice. Several key lessons emerge:

Use structured consensus-building tools: Delphi-informed surveys offer a powerful alternative to traditional committees by facilitating broad input, surfacing consensus, and minimizing groupthink and hierarchy-related bias (Maxey & Kezar, 2016).

Leverage internal expertise and existing organizational rhythms: Embedding planning activities within established leadership meetings, departmental forums, and the current academic calendar reduced start-up delays and participant fatigue while reinforcing legitimacy through familiar structures (Bonomi Savignon & Costumato, 2024).

Invest in digital infrastructure: Accessible digital platforms, such as real-time dashboards, survey tools, and interactive websites, are essential for inclusion, transparency, fostering trust, facilitating feedback, and reinforcing accountability (Biondi & Russo, 2022).

Build credibility through leadership transparency: Regular, honest communication from institutional leaders is essential for maintaining engagement and ensuring legitimacy throughout the planning process (Southern, 2021).

Embed agility as a core design principle: Especially in volatile environments, strategic planning must accommodate iteration, real-time adjustment, and the reallocation of resources (Williams, 2021; Ahmed, 2023). Plans should be built to evolve, not simply to be executed.

Together, these elements form a new approach to strategic planning that might help to inform other units, departments, and schools. An approach that moves beyond the pursuit of static document that quickly becomes outdated to a process that creates living strategies that can respond to dynamic institutional and societal demands.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, this study reflects a single-institution case conducted within a health professions school embedded in a large public R1 university. Organizational context likely influenced both participation patterns and process effectiveness, limiting generalizability. Nevertheless, the case offers transferable design principles that may inform future applications in varied institutional settings (Bryson, 2018; Stensaker & Fumasoli, 2017). Second, while faculty and staff engagement remained comparatively strong, student survey participation was limited. This divergence reinforces evidence that engagement strategies must be tailored to stakeholder groups and highlights the value of hybrid approaches that incorporate alternative modalities when standard methods are insufficient (Hasson et al., 2025). Third, qualitative analysis for one survey round incorporated AI-assisted thematic categorization to support timely synthesis under compressed timelines. Although all AI-generated themes were

reviewed and validated by experienced qualitative researchers, AI-supported qualitative analysis remains an emerging practice with evolving standards (Xiao et al., 2024). Further research is needed to examine reliability, bias, and ethical considerations in applied organizational contexts. Finally, this study focuses on planning process outcomes rather than plan quality or long-term implementation success. While the framework embedded metrics and accountability structures intended to support execution, future longitudinal research is needed to assess how accelerated, participatory planning influences implementation, adaptability over time, and institutional outcomes (Castillo et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how a hybrid, Delphi-informed methodology can serve as an alternative to traditional strategic planning approaches in higher education contexts characterized by volatility and constraint. By combining iterative surveys with forums, benchmarking, and digital transparency, the process produced a strategic plan within six months, supported by strong participation and consensus among faculty and staff. The case further demonstrates that process design plays a critical role in shaping participation, legitimacy, and shared understanding during strategic planning efforts. Beyond the production of a strategic plan, the findings indicate that accelerated planning need not compromise inclusion or legitimacy when participation is broadened through low-burden, iterative engagement and supported by visible feedback loops. By integrating communication and transparency as core design elements rather than peripheral activities, the planning process reinforced shared ownership and confidence in decision-making. Taken together, these findings contribute to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of strategic planning in today's rapidly changing, higher education environment. Although exploratory and context-specific, this case suggests that institutions seeking to be agile and responsive may benefit from reimagining strategic planning as a deliberately designed, participatory process capable of producing a timely and agile directional framework.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE SURVEY STRUCTURES

SURVEY 1: REVIEW MISSION, VISION, VALUES

INTRODUCTION:

Welcome to the launch of the SHP 2025-2030 Strategic Planning Process! You are a critical participant in this endeavor; we value your input and need everyone's engagement to make this effort a success. To engage and learn from the entire SHP community, this planning process includes a series of short surveys as well as in-person/zoom meetings in multiple forms. We will also be launching a website in the near future where we will post survey results, calendar of events, and progress.

To begin, this first survey provides the opportunity to review, evaluate, and refresh the SHP mission, vision, and values. These statements will collectively serve as the cornerstone of our growth strategy.

This survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete and will be open for 7 days. In each section you will find a definition of mission, vision or values followed by examples from Rutgers and RBHS. You should then read SHP's version, remembering that our mission and vision need to align with Rutgers Health/RBHS, and provide your input.

Thank you for your participation!

INSTRUCTIONS
After reviewing the definitions provided and the mission, vision statements of Rutgers, Rutgers Health, and SHP. Please answer the survey questions. We strongly encourage you to use the text boxes to provide additional feedback and suggestions.

SECTION 1: MISSION REVIEW
       Mission Definition:
       Rutgers Mission:
       Rutgers Health Mission:
       School of Health Professions Mission:

Question	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
The current mission statement clearly describes SHP					
The current mission statement represents my role at SHP					
The current mission aligns with Rutgers and Rutgers Health?					

What changes, if any, do you recommend to improve the SHP mission?

SECTION 2: VISION REVIEW
      Vision Definition:
      Rutgers Vision:
      Rutgers Health Vision:
      School of Health Professions Vision

Question	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
This statement reflects a clear vision of SHP's future					
This statement inspires me about SHP's future					
This statement aligns with Rutgers and Rutgers Health vision?					

What changes, if any, do you recommend to improve the SHP Vision?

SECTION 3: VALUES REVIEW

      SHP aligns with Rutgers Health value statement which is shown below. Would you add anything to this value statement that is unique to SHP?

      What additional values, if any, might be unique to SHP

SURVEY 2: CONFIRM MISSION, VISION, VALUES, DRAFT PRIORITES

INTRODUCTION/INSTRUCTIONS

Welcome to Survey #2 of the SHP Strategic Planning Process. This survey has two sections:

Section 1: Based on the review and analysis of faculty and staff feedback provided in Survey #1, this section presents two versions of a revised mission, two versions of a revised vision, and the revised values.

 Section 2: The next step in the process is to build on the mission, vision, and values by defining strategic priority areas. This section asks for your input on the strategic opportunities SHP should prioritize in the next five years.

Thank you for your thoughtfulness and collaboration in this important process.

SECTION 1: RESPOND TO MISSION, VISION, VALUES OPTIONS

MISSION	VISION	VALUES
Option #1: TEXT	Option #1: TEXT	LIST
Option #2: TEXT	Option #2: TEXT	
CHOOSE OPTION	*CHOOSE OPTION*	*AGREE/DISAGREE*

SECTION 2: DRAFT STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Rutgers Health Strategic Priorities (2022-2027): List
SHP Strategic Priorities from Prior Strategic Plan: List

Briefly describe the top 3-5 strategic opportunities you believe are most critical for SHP to prioritize in the next five years.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

SURVEY 3: CONFIRM PRIORITIES and DRAFT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Introduction:

This survey presents a current DRAFT of SHP's 5 strategic priorities and associated goals for our strategic plan. These were provided in the e-mail invitation to this survey and are also attached here Strategic goals pdf for your convenience. You may find it helpful to review prior to starting the survey.

These priorities were developed from the input/feedback received through the surveys, focus groups, and discussions with faculty, staff, students, other key stakeholders, and the Steering Team. At this point, we are asking for you to identify specific initiatives (objectives) for each of the goals.

Instructions:

Underneath each strategic priority, there is a list of related goals. Please identify any specific initiatives that you feel would help us achieve that goal. You can provide as few or as many specific initiatives (objectives) as you wish. There is also an option under each strategic priority of "I have no ideas for this strategic priority this time".

EXAMPLE:
Strategic Priority: Strengthen Community and Connections
Goal: Increase internal knowledge-sharing and networking
Specific Initiative to Meet Objective: No-Class days for guest lectures, development, networking amongst faculty and staff (i.e., like the AI mini-conference just held at SHP) You can come in and out of this survey as often as you like until you officially sub

SURVEY # 4, Priority #1: Provide the highest quality, most innovative health professions education to ensure career-ready graduates

For Survey #4, there was a separate survey for each priority all following the structure below.

Instructions

In Survey #4, each strategic priority is presented along with associated goals, objectives, and actions. These were developed from surveys, discussion forums, individual feedback, and Steering Team review.

Survey #4 asks three questions for each objective and associated actions:

1)   Do you think these are on target (Yes/No)? – this question is required.
2)   Do you have additional suggestions for improvement?
3)   What will success look like? (i.e., what will you see/experience in our environment, what measures will we meet?)

The survey allows you to go backward and forward, so you can review the entire survey before completing your answers and submitting.

SAMPLE:

Priority 1, Goal 1: Advance didactic education by integrating cutting edge practices into pedagogy across programs.
Objective 1: Leverage AI, simulation, and other emerging technologies
Actions:
- Launch an interdisciplinary "Emerging Technology Taskforce " to recommend utilization of AI and other technology in pedagogy and teaching materials
- Evaluate and develop classroom technologies to support pedagogy
- Reach out to alumni, students on internship, and clinical partners to identify how AI is utilized in practice
- Provide series of annual training workshops/trainings in emerging educational technologies and AI

This objective and associated actions are on target:
- o   Yes
- o   No

Provide suggestions for improvement here:

Locus of Control and Strategic Planning Among Virginia Public School Principals

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how principals' control orientations affect the implementation of Virginia's Continuous Improvement Process. The research utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, grounded in Rotter's locus of control theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which are suggested to influence systematic planning engagement and effectiveness. Forty-four K–12 principals from diverse districts across Virginia completed the Strategic Locus of Control Scale , revealing a generally balanced locus of control with a slight external tendency. No notable patterns were observed between locus of control and demographic variables. Based on the survey results, purposeful interviews with six principals explored contrasting perspectives on preparedness and strategic decision-making: internally oriented principals cited leadership experience and autonomy, while externally oriented principals described systemic constraints, compliance pressures, and stakeholder dependency. All participants reported challenges related to staffing shortages and limited policy flexibility. Though strategic planning was widely regarded as useful, its perceived impact on academic outcomes varied and was often indirect. Though limited by sample size and response rate, findings suggest that principals' psychological beliefs may influence their strategic planning engagement and provide preliminary insights for improving district and school-level planning capacity in the development of Comprehensive School Support Plans, state policy implementation, and systematic approaches to building planning support.

KEYWORDS: continuous improvement process, control theory, self-efficacy theory, school leadership

Introduction

The landscape of public education in the Commonwealth of Virginia is shaped by various mandates and strategic initiatives to foster continuous improvement. Among these, the Virginia Continuous Improvement Process (VCIP) stands out as a framework guiding school principals in developing and implementing strategic plans, known as Comprehensive School Support Plans (CSSP). The VCIP is intended to aid principals in aligning their actions with broader state educational initiatives to structure their approach to continuous improvement. The structure of these plans is designed to enhance student performance and ensure that schools meet established accreditation standards set by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) standards outline expectations for both student achievement and attendance. Student performance remains a central focus of public education in Virginia as the VDOE continues to revise its standards and establish more rigorous expectations for academic growth. Under the state's updated accountability system, the VDOE projected in August 2024 that, "55.5% of schools were significantly "off track" and not meeting the state's expectation for growth, achievement, and readiness, while current data shows that 34.7% of schools are "off track" and would need

intensive support" (Cline, 2024, para. 8). The challenges associated with meeting Virginia's newly established accountability standards further underscore the importance of principals effectively utilizing the VCIP in developing their CSSPs. While the VCIP provides a systematic framework for school improvement, implementation quality varies significantly across schools. Some principals approach strategic planning as a meaningful improvement process, while others treat it primarily as a compliance requirement. This variance in engagement levels potentially undermines the systematic benefits that strategic planning frameworks are designed to provide and may contribute to inconsistent educational outcomes across Virginia schools.

The variance is often influenced by individual psychological factors such as locus of control, which attempts to explain an individual's belief that they can control events affecting them. Internal-oriented principals believe they have substantial influence over their school's outcomes, while external-oriented principals believe it is external factors beyond their control that dictate outcomes (Rotter, 1966). Additionally, the relationship between principals' locus of control and their strategic planning efforts is further complicated by the varying levels of preparedness and support available to them. Factors such as district resource allocation, access to professional development, and stakeholder engagement play critical roles in shaping how principals perceive and implement strategic plans. The degree to which school principals believe in the effectiveness of strategic planning, influenced by their individual locus of control beliefs, poses a critical question. What systematic approaches can divisions and states use to effectively support principals with different control orientations in implementing strategic planning frameworks? This ambiguity warrants thorough investigation to uncover the nuanced relationship among principals' beliefs, their preparedness for strategic planning, and their perceptions of the impact of these plans on academic success. Addressing this gap in understanding can enhance educational leadership practice, impact policy, transform professional development, and foster academic excellence within the Commonwealth of Virginia. The literature on locus of control and strategic planning within educational contexts encompasses diverse studies that delve into the multifaceted relationship among principals' beliefs, attitudes, and leadership styles and their influence on strategic planning processes. A commonality among these studies is the exploration of how principals' perceptions of their roles as instructional leaders, levels of autonomy and control, and attitudes toward change shape their engagement in strategic planning endeavors (Anderson & Schneier, 1978; Alfadli, 2019; Bryson et al., 2018; Ford & Ihrke, 2020; George et al., 2019; Goldring & Hallinger, 2012; Jantzi & Leithwood, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008).

Researchers have examined the alignment among principals' leadership beliefs and the objectives of their strategic plans, alongside the extent to which their leadership practices mirror the priorities and strategies articulated within these plans. Moreover, scholars have investigated various facets of strategic planning, including goal setting, decision-making processes, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement, to elucidate the interplay among principals' beliefs, leadership behaviors, and strategic planning practices within specific educational contexts (Anderson & Schneier, 1978; Alfadli, 2019; Bryson et al., 2018; Ford & Ihrke, 2020; George et al., 2019; Goldring & Hallinger, 2012; Jantzi & Leithwood, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008). However, despite the breadth of literature on this topic, considerable variation exists in the specific focus, methodologies employed, and findings across these studies. While existing research examines various aspects of principal leadership and strategic planning, limited research specifically investigates how principals' locus of control orientations affects their implementation of mandated strategic planning frameworks like Virginia's VCIP.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to examine Virginia public elementary and secondary school principals' locus of control, their preparedness for strategic planning under the VCIP, and their perceptions of its impact on student academic performance. By examining how psychological orientations affect systematic planning implementation, this research provides empirically grounded insights into the factors shaping principals' commitment to and effectiveness in strategic planning. These findings can inform educational policy and practice in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Research Questions

The research questions guide the inquiry into the intricate dynamics of educational leadership within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

1. What is the overall locus of control orientation of K-12 principals in Virginia?
2. What differences, if any, are there in locus of control based on demographic variables (e.g., gender, school level, school enrollment, years of experience)?
3. How do principals perceive their preparedness for writing and implementing strategic plans?
4. How does the perceived preparedness for strategic planning differ among principals with high internal or high external locus of control scores?
5. What specific resources or support do principals believe are necessary to enhance their capacity to develop and implement a strategic plan effectively?
6. To what extent do school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia perceive strategic planning as a valuable tool for enhancing academic success?

Overview of the Study

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, beginning with a survey of Virginia principals using the Strategic Locus of Control Scale, followed by purposeful interviews with selected participants to explore the quantitative findings in depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was selected because the quantitative phase could identify overall patterns in principals' locus of control orientations and potential demographic relationships, while the qualitative phase would explain how these orientations manifest in principals' actual strategic planning behaviors, decision-making processes, and beliefs about VCIP effectiveness. The study prioritized the qualitative phase, as the interpretation of interview data provided explanatory depth that could not be gathered during the quantitative phase given the limited size of the quantitative sample.

Literature Review
Strategic Planning in Educational Organizations

Strategic planning plays a crucial role in education, providing educational organizations with a clear direction to navigate the complexities of the modern educational landscape. Effective strategic planning ensures the efficient allocation of limited resources, maximizing the impact of investments in curriculum development, infrastructure, and faculty development (Bryson et al., 2018). However, despite widespread adoption of systematic strategic planning frameworks in education, implementation quality varies significantly across schools and districts. Research indicates that while strategic planning can improve educational outcomes (Mishcen & Roosa, 2022), the effectiveness of these initiatives often depends on how educational leaders perceive and engage with the planning process (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005).

Strategic Planning in the Commonwealth of Virginia

Virginia's approach to systematic school improvement evolved from compliance-focused mandates to supportive frameworks designed to address diverse school contexts. The Virginia Continuous Improvement Process (VCIP), developed by the Office of School Quality, serves as a strategic planning framework comprising six interconnected stages that integrate processes, structures, tools, and personnel to support educational institutions (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). This shift from prescriptive compliance to coaching-oriented support was catalyzed by recognition that "one size fits all" approaches were insufficient for addressing the unique needs of schools across the Commonwealth (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, 2020). However, despite this systematic framework, implementation quality varies significantly among principals, suggesting that individual factors may influence how leaders engage with mandated planning processes.

Implementation of Strategic Plans in Educational Organizations

Implementation represents the critical phase where strategic plans are translated into action, directly influencing organizational effectiveness and student outcomes (Fullan, 2011). Research indicates that successful implementation depends heavily on how leaders perceive their role in the change process and their capacity to engage stakeholders effectively. Studies reveal that educators respond more positively to leaders who demonstrate genuine concern for staff perspectives and use influence rather than positional authority to drive change (Thompson, 2019). However, implementation frequently fails due to managerial issues and inadequate attention to individual leader characteristics that affect engagement with planning processes (Doraisamy, 2021). This suggests that understanding psychological factors influencing how principals approach mandated planning frameworks may be crucial for improving systematic implementation outcomes.

Challenges Principals Encounter in Strategic Planning

Despite systematic frameworks like Virginia's VCIP, principals face significant barriers to effective strategic planning implementation. Research indicates that administrative overload, resource constraints, and inadequate professional development limit principals' capacity for strategic thinking and planning (Wise, 2015; Ada, 2018). However, individual responses to these challenges vary significantly, suggesting that psychological factors may influence how principals perceive and navigate implementation barriers, ultimately affecting their engagement with systematic planning processes.

Social Learning Theory and Locus of Control

This research is grounded in Rotter's (1966) social learning theory and concept of locus of control, which examines the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as having control over events that shape their lives. Rotter demonstrated that individuals with internal versus external control orientations exhibit different behavioral responses when they perceive outcomes as contingent on their own actions or as results of external forces (Rotter, 1966).

For strategic management contexts, Hodgkinson (1992) developed the Strategic Locus of Control Scale (SLOCS) to assess whether individuals believe strategic issues are resolved through systematic management techniques versus external environmental forces beyond organizational control. The SLOCS demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α = 0.70-0.88) and convergent validity with established locus of control measures while avoiding social desirability bias (Hodgkinson, 1992). This context-specific instrument provides a foundation for examining how principals' control orientations influence their engagement with systematic planning processes like Virginia's VCIP.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine how Virginia principals' locus of control orientations affects their implementation of VCIP requirements. The quantitative phase identified locus of control patterns among principals, followed by qualitative interviews to explore how these orientations influence systematic planning approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was selected because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex variables while permitting sequential data collection that effectively manages researcher resources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This study received approval from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's Institutional Review Board. All participants provided informed consent before survey and interview participation. All interview recordings were stored securely with identifying information removed from transcripts.

Quantitative Phase

The Strategic Locus of Control Scale (SLOCS), developed by Hodgkinson (1992), was distributed to all 1,799 K-12 public school principals in Virginia via email through the Virginia Department of Education's principal directory. Permission to use the SLOCS was granted by Dr. Gerard P. Hodgkinson, Professor of Strategic Management & Behavioral Science at the University of Manchester. With the developer's approval, minimal terminology adaptations were made to align with educational contexts, substituting 'school' for 'company' and 'educational environment' for 'industry' while maintaining construct validity (Hodgkinson, personal communication, February 6, 2024). The adapted scale underwent review to ensure content validity for the educational context. Two educational leadership experts with expertise in principal evaluation and strategic planning reviewed the adapted items to confirm that the terminology changes preserved the original construct meaning. The resulting Cronbach's alpha of 0.827 in this sample was consistent with the reliability range reported in the original scale validation (α = 0.70-0.88; Hodgkinson, 1992), providing evidence that the minimal adaptations did not compromise internal consistency.

The 16-item scale used a five-point Likert format. Following the original SLOCS scoring procedures (Hodgkinson, 1992), eight items reflecting external locus of control orientations (items 1, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, and 15) were reverse-coded on the 5-point scale. Total SLOCS scores were calculated by averaging all 16 items after reverse coding, with lower scores indicating internal orientation and higher scores indicating external orientation. Three survey responses were excluded from analysis due to incomplete data (missing responses on multiple items), resulting in a final quantitative sample of 41 principals yielding a 2.4% response rate. Given the small sample size, only descriptive statistics were calculated. Data screening confirmed no violations of normality assumptions for the descriptive analyses conducted (skewness = 0.27, kurtosis = -0.52). Analysis of the survey results indicated a balanced locus of control with no demographic predictors. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Subgroup Statistical Analysis of SLOCS Scores.

Group	n	Mean	Median	Mode	Range	Correlation
Gender						-0.0390
Males	12	2.6414	2.5625	2.2500	1.6681	
Females	25	2.6037	2.5000	3.0000	1.5750	
Level						-0.3435
Elementary	20	2.7033	2.6645	2.5000	1.4375	
Middle	4	2.6898	2.5456	N/A	1.6681	
High	7	2.5094	2.4063	3.0000	3.1875	
Size						-0.3910
Small	12	2.7648	2.9375	2.9375	1.1875	
Medium	14	2.7300	2.8569	3.0000	1.5681	
Large	11	2.3081	2.3125	N/A	0.9788	
Experience						-0.4376
x < 1	5	2.5375	2.4375	N/A	1.1250	
1 < x < 5	15	2.8483	2.9375	2.9375	1.5681	
6 < x < 10	10	2.3225	2.2750	2.1875	1.4500	
11 < x < 15	4	2.6784	2.6069	2.5000	0.5000	
x > 16	1	2.2500	2.2500	N/A	0	

The balanced locus of control and the absence of demographic correlations prompted the qualitative phase to investigate alternative explanations for variance in principals' strategic planning engagement and perceived preparedness. These findings warranted qualitative investigation because the balanced orientation contradicted expectations that educational leaders would demonstrate predominantly internal control beliefs, and the lack of demographic predictors suggested that experiential or contextual factor might better explain variance in strategic planning approaches.

Qualitative Phase

At the survey conclusion, participants were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. Six principals were purposefully selected from willing participants, representing diverse locus of control orientations. Using a median split (2.5), three principals scoring below the median (more internal orientation) and three scoring at or above the median (more external orientation) were selected. Selection also considered variation in school level, enrollment size, and years of principal experience. Semi-structured interviews explored principals' preparedness for VCIP implementation, perceptions of controllable versus uncontrollable factors affecting strategic planning, resource needs, and beliefs about strategic planning effectiveness. An interview protocol was developed to ensure methodological rigor by providing structured guidance while enabling consistency across interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Prior to formal data collection, the protocol was pilot-tested with an educational leadership expert, and insights were used to refine question clarity and relevance. Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were conducted via a video conferencing platform. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher conducted initial open coding, followed by focused coding to identify recurring patterns. While six

interviews provided rich data illustrating contrasting perspectives, this sample size limits claims about theoretical saturation.

Data Analysis and Integration

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify locus of control patterns and demographic relationships. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify patterns in how principals with different control orientations approach systematic planning implementation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The findings from the quantitative phase were integrated into the qualitative phase through building, with results from both phases woven together through narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This integration enhanced validity and provided nuanced understanding of how psychological orientations affect systematic planning engagement.

Findings

The analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed responses to each of the research questions.

RQ 1: *What is the overall locus of control orientation of K-12 principals in Virginia?*

A mean SLOCS score of 2.6007 was calculated across the sample, indicating a balanced locus of control with a slight inclination towards an external orientation recorded among the principals surveyed. The median score of 2.5 further supports this balance, while the mode of 3 indicates that a notable number of principals leaned slightly toward an external perspective. The range of scores was 2.0256, reflecting some variability within the sample, though the standard deviation of 0.4852 suggests that most scores were relatively close to the mean.

RQ 2: *What differences, if any, are there in locus of control based on demographic variables?*

Further analysis explored potential correlations between locus of control orientation and demographic variables, including gender, school level, school size, and the years of experience in the role of principal. Among the demographic variables, no single factor showed a consistently strong or definitive impact on principals' strategic locus of control.

RQ 3: *How do principals perceive their preparedness for writing and implementing strategic plans?*

When asked about their perceptions of their readiness to develop and articulate a vision, mission, and goals for strategic planning under the guidance of the VCIP, principals' responses can be categorized into three key themes: (1) The Role of Experience in Strategic Planning Readiness, (2) Alignment and Ownership of the Vision, and (3) Policy and Accountability Pressures on Leader Confidence. The analysis of principals' perceptions of their preparedness for strategic planning indicated distinct differences based on locus of control orientation as well as variations in experiences, school contexts, and external pressures.

Theme 1: The Role of Experience in Strategic Planning Readiness

Principals consistently attributed their readiness to their professional experiences, leadership roles, or structured exposure to strategic planning. One principal stated, "I've waited a long time before becoming a principal. I worked with many different leaders and developed my approach based on those experiences" (Internal Medium Middle School Principal, personal communication, November 16, 2024). Principals in this sample reported their ability to write and implement strategic plans stemmed from their accumulated leadership experiences and understanding of the VCIP process which allowed them to articulate a clear vision and align stakeholders toward common goals.

Conversely, principals with less professional experience, leadership roles, or structured exposure to strategic planning described their ability to create and execute strategic plans as dependent on stakeholder engagement, available funding, and a lack of understanding of the broader district and state frameworks. One principal shared, "I feel supported, and I guess I would say I feel prepared. I mean, I just think that they're always outliers. You are always going to have some kids that have some unique needs" (External Small Elementary Principal, personal communication, November 20, 2024). These sentiments were also reflected in a statement made by a high school principal working in a rural district, who explained:

> *It depends on how prepared my stakeholders are and what they want to do. Because when you are a community school like we are, we are the hub of the community. In a suburban school, the district leads the planning. Here, funding and community values dictate what is possible. (External Medium High School Principal, personal communication, November 18, 2024)*

These views suggest that preparedness is tied to external conditions rather than personal capability.

Theme 2: Alignment and Ownership of the Vision

A key theme among principals was purposefully aligning school-based strategic planning with division-wide goals while emphasizing clarity and buy-in among staff. Many described actively reinforcing the school's vision and mission through ongoing communication and intentional alignment of initiatives. One middle school principal emphasized the importance of consistency: "We have three central themes that we believe will move us forward, and everything else ties back to those. Every meeting, every professional development session, everything is connected to those themes" (Internal Medium Middle School Principal, personal communication, November 16, 2024). When discussing the communication or changes with her staff, the same principal said, "They should be able to say, we're not just making random decisions. I want them to feel that it's all connected, that it's all aligned." However, these sentiments were not reflected by all principals. Some principals framed strategic planning as an adaptive process driven by external conditions, rather than connected to their leadership approach. These principals described their strategic plans as fluid and dependent on funding cycles, district-level mandates, and changing state-level accountability measures. When discussing ownership and a supervisor's oversight of their strategic plan, a principal shared:

> *If now they're... looking at my action steps today... on my latest review could they say 'Hey, look, we need another action step in this area,' sure, but that's going to be simple as, you know, insert row below create action step, you know, and put it in there. So again, yes, I feel very confident in being able to add a row to my SIP if need be. (External Medium Elementary Principal, personal communication, February 3, 2025)*

Unlike principals, who focused on ownership and alignment, other principals referenced external approval processes and contextual constraints impacting their overall plan.

Theme 3: Policy and Accountability Pressures on Leader Confidence

A commonality expressed among internal and external principals was uncertainty regarding their preparedness because of recent state-level policy shifts related to accountability and accreditation. Differences emerged in how principals perceived this challenge. Internal principals viewed it as an obstacle to navigate. One high school principal shared:

> *You know in talking to my staff when these changes were coming down, it doesn't change our day-to-day. We're here to deliver the best instruction, take care of our kids, and be able to show that day to day, week to week, month to month, year to year, we are improving. (Internal Small High School Principal, personal communication, January 31, 2025)*

External principals saw the policy changes as a constraint that directly impacted their ability to plan effectively. "It depends on if I was writing it based on the new performance indicators, like the ones that they just rolled out, I wouldn't be very confident because I'm not as familiar with those" (External Medium High School Principal, personal communication, November 18, 2024). Policy uncertainty affects principals' strategic planning confidence, particularly for external-oriented leaders who feel less in control of how policy changes will impact their schools.

RQ 4: *How does the perceived preparedness for strategic planning differ among principals with high internal or high external locus of control scores?*

Next, principals were asked how their personal beliefs over control over educational outcomes influence their perceived preparedness to engage in strategic planning, and what they believed was in, or out of their control concerning leading their school and student academic outcomes. Analysis of their responses to these questions revealed three major themes: (1) Control Over the Learning Environment, (2) Navigating Controllable Challenges, and (3) Halted by Systemic Obstacles. Differences and similarities emerged when examining the locus of control orientation of principals.

Theme 1: Control Over the Learning Environment

Regardless of their locus of control orientation, all principals expressed a sense of agency over their students' learning environment. Each principal emphasized relationship-building, instructional oversight, and problem-solving as key drivers of success. These personal factors were regarded as more influential than instructional elements such as curriculum and classroom instruction. Statements such as, "You know what's in our control is, and going back to this, it's from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm. That's what's in our control" (Internal Small High School Principal, personal communication, January 31, 2025). Principals with external orientations expressed similar beliefs. One principal reflected, "I think that we can provide a positive learning environment every day. I think that's something that we can do" (External Medium High School Principal, personal communication, November 18, 2024). These principals consistently prioritized their students' needs over the constraints of the education system. They viewed challenges related to student support as opportunities to adapt and refine their approach.

Theme 2: Navigating Controllable Challenges

The analysis of interview responses indicated distinct differences in how principals with high internal and external locus of control perceive their preparedness for strategic planning and their ability to navigate challenges. Principals with an internal locus of control tended to view strategic

planning as a tool, enabling them to shape their schools' success within existing constraints. For example, one principal explained, "I think that we can look at every child individually and set goals and provide supports for every child. I don't think there's much that we can't address" (Internal Medium Middle School Principal, personal communication, November 16, 2024). Internally oriented principals also emphasized the importance of understanding policies, leveraging relationships, and problem-solving to achieve their goals. One high school principal shared his perspective, explaining, "You need to know policy, you need to know the law. If you start there, and you know 'okay this becomes my guardrails.' You say, 'I can operate all in this area.' Then you have a ton of control" (Internal Small High School Principal, personal communication, January 31, 2025). In contrast, principals with an external locus of control often perceive strategic planning as a mandated process that limits their ability to create meaningful change. They revealed frustration with bureaucratic constraints and policy-driven expectations. As stated by an externally oriented principal:

> So, I think that's where we run into the problem with the strategic plans and the school improvement plans and things like that is, that the state wants us to do something because that's what they think is going to work and it doesn't always work, especially for different places. (External Medium High School Principal, personal communication, November 18, 2024).

The statements above reflect a view of top-down mandates disconnected from their schools' realities, making it difficult for them to feel fully engaged in the planning process.

Theme 3: Halted by Systemic Obstacles

Finally, perspectives surrounding external barriers were explored. Both internal and external-oriented principals expressed frustration with systemic inequities, policy constraints, and bureaucratic pressures beyond their control. Concerning systematic inequities, one principal reflected on the home environment of many of their students, stating, "I think the outside of my control are those economic factors...I have, you know, some students who I know where they're in a two-bedroom hotel room with seven people, that's got to affect your sleep" (External Medium Elementary Principal, personal communication, February 3, 2025). These systemic barriers create significant challenges for systematic planning implementation, as principals must develop strategic plans that account for factors beyond their direct influence. The VCIP framework requires principals to set measurable goals and identify strategies for improvement, yet these external constraints limit their ability to control key variables affecting student outcomes.

When discussing policy and bureaucratic pressures, one principal illustrated political challenges by stating:

> I would say what they do in Richmond is out of my control. I think that's the problem with growth models and things is, that no matter how you write the policy in order to tailor it to fit a very poor school, whether it be in the mountains of Virginia or Newport News or if that's going to be under the same umbrella as the schools in Stanton and Fairfax and Lowden County, you're going to have to make it so broad that in three or four years, you're going to have to rewrite it no matter what. (External Medium High School Principal, personal communication, November 18, 2024)

Whether the principal was internal or external-oriented, they viewed systematic and political barriers as roadblocks that could not be overcome. Their responses reflected a sense of powerlessness, as they reported that even well-intended educational policies often failed to address the unique needs of their schools and communities, creating long-term disadvantages.

RQ 5: *What specific resources or support do principals believe are necessary to enhance their capacity to develop and implement a strategic plan effectively?*
Principals were asked to identify additional resources that would enhance their strategic planning capabilities. This question explored whether principals with different control orientations would perceive different types of resource needs. Based on their responses, two key themes emerged: (1) Necessity of Additional Staff, and (2) Necessity of Qualified Staff.

Theme 1: The Need for Additional Staff

All six principals interviewed emphasized the necessity of increasing human resources to support their strategic plans. This sentiment is reflected in statements such as:

> *We would have another reading specialist to help with our letter recognition and letter sound goal for our school. We would have either therapeutic day treatment or licensed clinical psychologists on staff. If money weren't an object, I'd have two or three speech therapists on staff right now because of our growing needs for speech services. (External Small Elementary Principal, personal communication, November 20, 2024)*

These responses express the critical need for specialized staff and additional services to enhance educational outcomes in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Theme 2: The Need for Qualified Staff

Notably, resource needs did not differ by locus of control orientation. Both internal- and external-oriented principals converged on staffing as the primary constraint, suggesting that resource scarcity creates barriers that transcend psychological orientations. One principal highlighted this need, stating, "When I look at programs that have failed, it's rarely like the materials, the equipment, stuff like that, it's usually the person. Number one would be staff, highly qualified staff" (Internal Small High School Principal, personal communication, January 31, 2025). These principals highlighted the need for staff members who possess the skills and expertise necessary to drive meaningful change.

RQ 6: *To what extent do school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia perceive strategic planning as a valuable tool for enhancing academic success?*
Finally, principals were asked to what extent they viewed strategic planning as valuable and whether they could attribute academic outcomes to it. This question explored whether locus of control orientation would predict confidence in strategic planning effectiveness. Analysis of their responses to these questions suggested two key themes: (1) Strategic Planning as a Necessary but Imperfect Tool, and (2) Attributing Outcomes to Strategic Planning.

Theme 1: Strategic Planning as a Necessary but Imperfect Tool

Principals generally agree that strategic planning is valuable. One principal likened a strategic plan to a "lesson plan for the school," explaining, "I think a strategic plan is very important. I couldn't imagine a school being very effective in student academic achievement really being monitored without it" (External Small Elementary Principal, personal communication, November 20, 2024). However, some principals do not see strategic planning as a magic solution. This opinion is reflected in comments such as, "I mean, I don't think it's not valuable. I really don't. I think that it can't be the end-all, be-all" (External Medium High School Principal, personal communication, November 18, 2024).

Theme 2: Attributing Outcomes to Strategic Planning

Some principals attributed tangible improvements to strategic planning. One principal explained:

> We have and in my CIP we were we've really targeted our risk ratios and the discipline with our African-American students and our multi-racial students... I want to say we were at 354 major referrals at this point last year and we're at 177... I think we're doing well, and I think that I will say that the CIP really quantified it. (External Medium Elementary Principal, personal communication, February 3, 2025)

However, other leaders were hesitant to attribute the outcome to strategic planning, but rather from leaders paying closer attention to key issues. A principal reflected:

> They improved their attendance through the plan. I would argue that they improved their attendance because they just paid more attention to it. I don't know that it was the plan that did it, but they improved their attendance because they really focused on it. (External Medium High School Principal, personal communication, November 18, 2024)

Discipline, specific academic improvements, and attendance were cited, but causation is difficult to determine. This suggests that planning acts as a focus mechanism rather than the sole driver of improvement.

Discussion

This study examined how Virginia principals' locus of control orientations affected their implementation of the Virginia Continuous Improvement Process (VCIP), revealing critical insights for systematic educational planning. The findings suggest that that psychological factors significantly influence how principals engage with mandated planning frameworks, with important implications for VCIP effectiveness and Virginia's broader strategic planning system.

Balanced Locus of Control

The overall locus of control among K-12 Principals in Virginia in this sample is generally balanced, with a slight inclination toward an external orientation. The mean SLOCS score was 2.6007 with a median of 2.5, and a mode of 3. While most principals' scores clustered near the average, as evidenced by a standard deviation of 0.4852, a small number of principals demonstrated

a more external orientation, as indicated by the positive skew of 0.2708. This balanced orientation has important implications for VCIP implementation, as Virginia's framework requires principals to navigate both internal capacity building and external accountability requirements. The slight external tendency may reflect principals' experience with rigid state mandates that limit their autonomy in adapting VCIP stages to school-specific contexts. According to Rotter (1966), individuals with an internal locus of control believe outcomes result from their own actions, while those with an external locus attribute outcomes to outside forces such as luck or fate. The slight external inclination observed among principals may be attributed to systemic challenges that limit their perceived control over school outcomes. However, the overall balance found in the sample supports Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, where effective leaders maintain belief in their capacity to influence outcomes while acknowledging contextual limitations.

Demographic characteristics such as gender, school level, school size, and years of experience did not correlate strongly with principals' locus of control orientations. No single demographic variable consistently had a strong or definitive impact on principals' strategic locus of control, with correlations constrained by small subgroup sizes (see Table 1). This finding suggests that locus of control orientations stem from experiential rather than demographic factors, indicating that systematic planning for professional development cannot rely on demographic assumptions. Instead, districts must assess individual principals' control orientations and tailor VCIP implementation support accordingly, rather than assuming that demographic characteristics predict planning approach or readiness.

Experience and Preparation

Among principals in this sample, those with internal orientations and more years of experience reported feeling better prepared to develop and implement strategic plans. Principals with an internal locus of control consistently attributed their readiness to their professional experiences, leadership roles, and structured exposure to strategic planning. The findings of this study are consistent with research indicating that individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to set ambitious goals, stay committed to their objectives, and persist despite challenges. As strategic planning includes long-term commitments and adaptive strategies, leaders with strong self-efficacy beliefs are better equipped to envision and execute these plans. To do so, they are required to leverage their confidence to motivate teams and drive organizational success (Chemers et al., 2000; Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Different Approaches to Planning

Within this sample, a principal's locus of control appeared to influence their approach to strategic planning. The analysis of interview responses indicated distinct differences in how principals with high internal and external locus of control perceive their preparedness for strategic planning and their ability to navigate challenges. Principals with an internal locus of control tended to view strategic planning as a tool, enabling them to shape their schools' success within existing constraints, while principals with an external locus of control tended to perceive strategic planning as a mandated process that limits their ability to create meaningful change. Prior research by Anderson & Schneier (1978), Bandura (1997), and Hodgkinson (1992) reinforces this distinction, indicating that internally oriented school leaders are more eager to adapt, and engage in decision-making. Additional studies show that leaders who feel constrained by external accountability measures struggle to implement strategic plans effectively (Bealer, 2015; Ford & Ihrke, 2020). These different approaches directly affect VCIP implementation quality. Internal-oriented principals are more

likely to view VCIP stages as tools for school improvement, while external-oriented principals may approach them as compliance requirements. This suggests that Virginia's systematic planning framework may achieve different levels of effectiveness depending on principals' psychological orientations.

Systematic Barriers

Principals in this study identify systemic barriers, including policy mandates, accountability pressures, and funding constraints, as significant challenges to effective strategic planning and implementation. Perspectives surrounding external barriers were explored. Both internal and external-oriented principals expressed frustration with systemic inequities, policy constraints, and bureaucratic pressures beyond their control The frustration expressed by principals regarding the impact of shifting accreditation standards, legislative decisions, and one-size-fits-all policies align with Ford & Ihrke's (2020) research, which highlights the difficulty of designing statewide educational reforms that fairly accommodate districts with diverse needs. These barriers specifically impact VCIP implementation by creating tensions between state-mandated goals and school-level realities. Virginia's accreditation standards require measurable progress, yet principals face constraints that limit their ability to control key variables affecting student outcomes. This tension may explain inconsistent VCIP implementation across schools.

Required Resources

Principals in this sample reported that increasing the number of qualified staff members is essential for enhancing strategic planning effectiveness and implementation. All six principals interviewed emphasized the necessity of increasing human resources to support their strategic plans. However, while all principals advocated for increased staffing, several emphasized hiring highly qualified personnel.

Strategic planning requires time, resources, and leadership capacity, all of which are strained by administrative overload. When principals are overburdened with administrative tasks, they have little time for strategic thinking and planning. Financial limitations and staffing shortages put a strain on principals, leaving them feeling unsupported and overburdened (Levin et al., 2020; Wise, 2015).

Impact of Plans

While principals in the sample reported viewing strategic planning as valuable for guiding school improvement efforts, they remained uncertain about its direct impact on student academic performance. Some principals attributed tangible improvements to strategic planning. However, other leaders were hesitant to attribute the outcome to strategic planning, but rather from leaders paying closer attention to key issues.

This finding aligns with research suggesting that strategic plans are most effective when actively implemented and embedded into school culture, requiring dynamic, adaptive leadership to foster accountability and continuous improvement (Bealer, 2015). Ultimately, this finding suggests that strategic planning may act more as a focus mechanism, channeling attention to key issues, rather than serving as the sole driver of improvement.

Integration of Findings

Table 2. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings.

Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Explanation	Meta-Inference
Balanced locus of control (LOC)	Principals described both agency over learning environment and frustration with systemic barriers.	Principals' control beliefs are context-dependent; they feel empowered within schools but constrained by external policy
No demographic predictors of LOC	Experienced principals attributed preparedness to accumulated learning experiences rather than years alone.	LOC orientation may be developmental rather than demographic.
Slight correlation between experience and LOC	Internally oriented principals emphasized leveraging policy knowledge and relationships; externally oriented cited bureaucratic constraints.	Control orientation shapes how principals interpret and navigate the same policy environment

Table 2 illustrates how the qualitative finding explained the quantitative patterns of the sample. It reveals that locus of control manifests not as a fixed trait but as a psychological orientation shaped by accumulated experiences and contextual factors.

Limitations

Several limitations constrain the generalizability and interpretation of this study's findings. First, the quantitative phase yielded a 2.4% response rate, with 41 principals providing complete data suitable for analysis. The low response rate creates a threat to representativeness and likely represents self-selection bias, as principals who are more engaged in strategic planning may have been more inclined to participate. Consequently, the findings may not represent a full range of perspectives among Virginia principals. Second, the small sample size limited the statistical power for detecting demographic relationships. The absence of notable correlations between locus of control and demographic variables should be interpreted cautiously. Third, six qualitative interviews, while providing rich data illustrating contrasting perspectives, may not have reached theoretical saturation. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures a single point in time during a transition of Virginia's accountability measures. The timing may have influenced principals' responses regarding policy uncertainty. Longitudinal research would strengthen understanding of whether locus of control is a stable trait or develops through accumulated planning experiences.

Implications

The following implications are associated with the findings from this study.

Implication 1: Redesign professional development for systematic planning

Given that locus of control stems from experiential rather than demographic factors, the findings suggest that districts may benefit from creating mentorship programs pairing experienced principals with novices to model effective VCIP implementation strategies. This experiential approach may build an internal locus of control through successful planning experiences.

Implication 2: Enhance VCIP implementation through differentiated support

Based on these preliminary findings, school divisions may benefit from developing targeted professional development that addresses different locus of control orientations to improve VCIP implementation effectiveness. Internal-oriented principals may benefit from support in stakeholder engagement and collaborative planning, while external-oriented principals may require training in navigating constraints while maintaining agency in school-specific adaptations of VCIP requirements.

Implication 3: Modify policy frameworks to support effective planning

Virginia policymakers might consider revising VCIP requirements to provide structured flexibility, allowing principals to adapt planning processes to school contexts while maintaining accountability standards. This addresses the tension between state mandates and school-level realities that undermines planning effectiveness.

Implication 4: Address systematic barriers to planning implementation

State and district leaders might consider addressing staffing shortages that prevent effective strategic plan implementation. Removing Virginia's support staff cap and investing in specialized personnel would enable principals to execute their strategic plans rather than viewing them as compliance exercises.

Implication 5: Advance research on planning effectiveness

State departments of education should fund research examining which components of systematic planning frameworks like VCIP produce measurable student outcomes, enabling evidence-based refinements to improve planning system effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study suggests that principals' locus of control orientations may influence their implementation of Virginia's systematic strategic planning requirements. The findings reveal patterns of psychological factors that determine whether principals approach the VCIP as a meaningful improvement tool or primarily as a compliance exercise. Though limited by sample size and response rate, this study contributes to educational planning literature by illustrating how principals' locus of control orientations shapes their interpretations of and engagement with mandated planning frameworks. However, the qualitative findings suggest that leadership experience is a potentially stronger predictor of planning readiness than locus of control orientation alone, suggesting that control beliefs may be developmental. These patterns, though requiring validation with larger samples, suggest that planning frameworks should account for psychological variability in their design and implementation support. For practitioners, successful systematic planning implementation requires attention to how leaders perceive and engage with mandated processes. Districts may be able to improve planning effectiveness by providing differentiated professional development that acknowledges different control orientations and designing systems that offer appropriate autonomy within accountability structures. Future research should use larger representative samples to examine how these psychological factors interact with specific planning components and explore the longitudinal impacts of differentiated support on implementation outcomes. This research provides educational planning professionals with preliminary insights for enhancing systematic planning effectiveness through psychologically-informed approaches to leadership development and policy implementation.

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The Role of Educational Planning in the Quality of Secondary School Performance in Somaliland: A Bayesian Approach

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ABSTRACT

Educational planning plays a vital role in improving the quality of secondary education, particularly in fragile and resource-constrained contexts such as Somaliland. This study examines the interrelationships among four key dimensions of educational planning. planning, implementation, evaluation, and environment and support—and their contribution to secondary school performance. Data were collected from 85 secondary school teachers and analyzed using a Bayesian statistical framework, incorporating descriptive analysis, Bayesian correlation analysis, Bayesian linear regression, and Bayesian one-sample tests. The findings indicate that perceptions across all four dimensions are generally positive and closely interconnected, reflecting the systemic nature of educational planning processes. Planning demonstrates strong associations with implementation, evaluation, and environment and support, highlighting its coordinating role within the educational system. Among the dimensions, implementation and evaluation emerge as the most influential predictors of educational performance, while environment and support appear to play a complementary role when considered alongside other factors. Overall, the results provide strong evidence that all dimensions contribute meaningfully to secondary school performance. The study contributes to the literature by applying Bayesian methods to educational planning research in Somaliland. Substantively, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening participatory, evidence-based planning, effective implementation, and systematic evaluation to enhance the quality and sustainability of secondary education in fragile contexts.

KEYWORDS: educational planning, Bayesian analysis, teacher performance, secondary education, Somaliland

Introduction

Educational planning is a critical foundation for achieving quality teaching and learning across all levels of education. It provides a systematic framework for aligning educational goals, resources, and policies to ensure effective learning outcomes (Meng, 2023). The foundations of educational planning establish the necessary guidelines for managing resources, setting priorities, and responding to both national and institutional needs (Taylor et al., 2008). This structured approach is particularly vital in developing contexts, where schools often face constraints related to infrastructure, professional capacity, and policy alignment (Ajani, 2023; Mahapoonyanont, 2024; Nugroho, 2024). Scholars have argued that educational planning contributes directly to improving teacher performance, which in turn enhances overall educational quality (Anderson, 2004; Mahgoub et al., 2014). According to Endo et al. (2025), Contemporary approaches to educational planning are not merely about resource distribution but also about integrating innovation, accountability, and responsiveness to societal needs. In this sense, planning becomes a dynamic process linking administrative efficiency with professional development, ensuring that schools operate effectively within rapidly changing environments.

Theoretical Framework

A significant body of research highlights the role of school-level planning in improving instructional quality. Research has established that high-quality school planning positively influences teacher performance at both intermediate and secondary levels (Kyriakides, 2012). When school plans are comprehensive and data-driven, teachers are better equipped to address learners' needs, adapt to curriculum changes, and maintain professional growth (Bigner, 2017). Similarly, Chalmers (2007) and Natarajan (2000) stress that quality education cannot be achieved without systematic planning frameworks that integrate standards of excellence with accreditation requirements. Such frameworks enable schools to benchmark performance and pursue continuous improvement. The effectiveness of educational planning is also tied to professional development outcomes (Guskey, 2014). Structured planning processes significantly improve the professional performance of secondary school teachers (Saad et al., 2021; Sultan & Allehaby, 2016). Leadership practices built on planning principles enhance accountability and instructional support (Ping He, 2024). Effective planning requires adaptable strategies across diverse educational systems and relies on evidence-based approaches to address disparities in access, equity, and quality (Dean & Sutherland, 2020).

The Context of Somaliland

In the context of Somaliland, the need for structured educational planning is particularly urgent due to limited institutional capacity, political instability, and fragmented coordination (Gandrup, 2020; Melesse & Obsiye, 2022). While the government has initiated policies to expand access to secondary education, the lack of comprehensive planning frameworks undermines quality improvement efforts (Melesse & Obsiye, 2022). Integrating data-driven approaches, participatory planning, and teacher professional development is essential to align school-level interventions with national education goals (Schildkamp, 2019). In Somaliland, strengthening evidence-based, participatory, and professionally-oriented planning frameworks can enhance the quality of secondary education and better prepare students for social and economic development (Gandrup, 2020; Melesse & Obsiye, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how educational planning influences the quality of secondary school performance in Somaliland. Specifically, the study investigates the interrelationships between planning, implementation, evaluation, and environment/support dimensions and their combined effect on teacher performance and overall educational outcomes. To achieve this objective, the study applies a Bayesian statistical framework to provide robust and credible evidence on the predictive role of planning-related processes in enhancing school effectiveness within a fragile state context. Accordingly, the main hypothesis of the study is that educational planning through planning, implementation, evaluation, and environment/support dimensions significantly and positively influences teacher performance and overall secondary school effectiveness in Somaliland.

Novelty and Contribution

A key novel contribution of this study lies in its methodological approach. The use of Bayesian statistical analysis is still relatively uncommon in education research, particularly in fragile or developing contexts, due to its non-recognition and constrained resources. Employing Bayes Factors and posterior distributions offers richer insights and more decisive evidence than traditional frequentist methods, enhancing the reliability of the conclusions. The study also

addresses a significant gap in the empirical literature on educational planning in Somaliland, where research remains scarce due to weak institutional capacity and limited data availability. Findings demonstrate that while environment and support are highly valued by teachers, implementation and evaluation are the strongest predictors of performance, emphasizing that resources alone are insufficient without systematic planning, monitoring, and teacher professional development. Finally, the research contributes to the global education and development agenda by aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, particularly Target 4.1, which seeks to ensure that all students complete free, equitable, and quality secondary education. Overall, this study underscores the importance of strengthening participatory, evidence-based planning frameworks as a pathway to improving secondary education quality in Somaliland.

Methodology

This study investigated the role of educational planning in the quality of educational performance at secondary schools in Somaliland using a quantitative, cross-sectional design. Data were collected from 85 participants across four key dimensions: Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, and Environment and Support, with all variables treated as continuous. The dependent variable (DV) was overall educational performance. The independent variables (IVs) were Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, and Environment and Support. Analyses were conducted entirely within a Bayesian framework, enabling a robust evaluation of evidence for hypothesized relationships. Descriptive statistics summarized the central tendencies and dispersion of each dimension, while Bayesian correlation analyses quantified the strength of associations among them. To examine the predictors of educational planning, Bayesian linear regression and Bayesian Model Averaging (BMA) were applied, calculating inclusion Bayes Factors and 95% credible intervals for each predictor. Model diagnostics, including residuals vs. fitted plots, assessed assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity. Finally, Bayesian one-sample t-tests evaluated whether the mean scores for each dimension were credibly greater than zero, providing probabilistic evidence of their contribution to educational performance.

Results

This section presents the statistical analyses conducted to examine the interrelationships among the planning, implementation, evaluation, and environment/support dimensions, following Bayesian reporting standards. A Bayesian analytical framework was applied throughout to quantify the strength of evidence for the tested hypotheses. Accordingly, the results are organized into four components: descriptive statistics, Bayesian correlation analysis (including Bayes Factors), Bayesian linear regression, and Bayesian one-sample t-tests, with findings reported using posterior estimates, credible intervals, and visualizations of posterior distributions to enhance transparency and robustness.

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 85 participants were included in the analysis. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the four study dimensions.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Descriptive	N	Mean	SD
Planning Dimension	85	2.349	0.779
Implementation Dimension	85	2.472	0.693
Evaluation Dimension	85	2.308	0.688
Environment And Support Dimension	85	2.500	0.619

The Environment and Support Dimension recorded the highest mean score (M = 2.50), followed by Implementation (M = 2.47), Planning (M = 2.35), and Evaluation (M = 2.31). These results suggest a relatively balanced perception across dimensions, with environment and support being evaluated slightly more favorably.

Bayesian Correlation Analysis

Bayesian Pearson correlations were computed to assess the associations between the Planning Dimension and the other three dimensions. As shown in Table 2, all correlations were positive and substantial, with decisive Bayesian evidence.

Table 2. Bayesian Pearson Correlation Pairs.

Bayesian Pearson Correlation		r	$\text{Log}(BF_{10})$
Planning Dimension	Implementation Dimension	0.607	16.66
Planning Dimension	Evaluation Dimension	0.565	13.58
Planning Dimension	Environment And Support Dimension	0.596	15.79

The Planning Dimension demonstrated strong positive correlations with Implementation ($r = 0.607$), Evaluation ($r = 0.565$), and Environment and Support ($r = 0.596$). The $\text{Log}(BF_{10})$ values (> 10) provide decisive evidence in favor of these associations. Visual inspection of scatterplots and posterior distributions (see Figures 1–3) further confirm the robustness of these correlations.

Figure 1. Correlation between Planning and Implementation Dimensions.
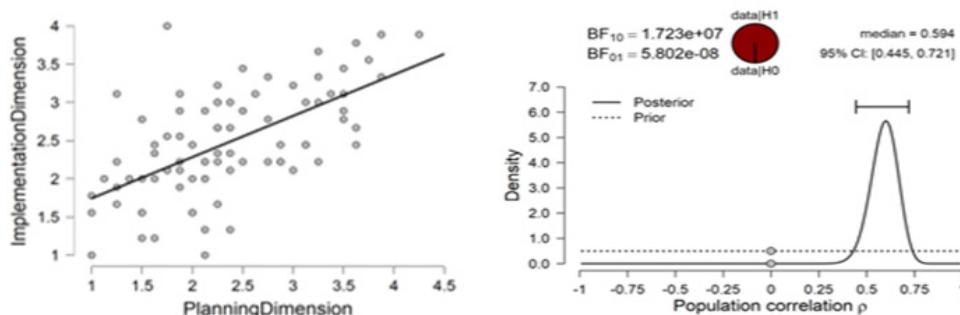
As shown in Figure 2, a Bayesian correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between the Planning Dimension and the Implementation Dimension. The scatter plot illustrates a positive linear relationship, with higher planning scores corresponding to higher implementation scores. This relationship is quantified by the posterior distribution, which indicates a median population correlation of $\rho = 0.594$, with a 95% credible interval (CI) of [0.445, 0.721]. Additionally, the analysis yielded a Bayes Factor (BF_{10}) of 1.72×10^7, providing decisive evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis that a significant positive correlation exists over the null hypothesis

Figure 2. Correlation between Planning and Evaluation Dimensions.
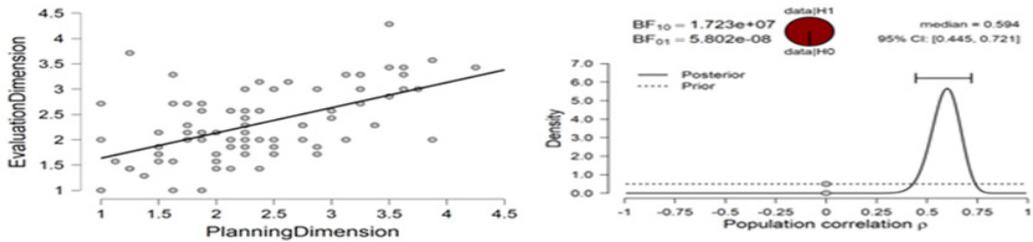
As illustrated in Figure 2, the relationship between the Planning Dimension and the Evaluation Dimension is depicted. The scatter plot reveals a positive linear trend, where higher planning scores are associated with higher evaluation scores. This strong association is supported by the Bayesian analysis, which yields a median correlation of $\rho = 0.594$ and a Bayes Factor (BF_{10}) of 1.72×10^7, providing decisive evidence for a significant positive correlation.

Figure 3. Correlation between Planning and Environment and Support Dimensions.
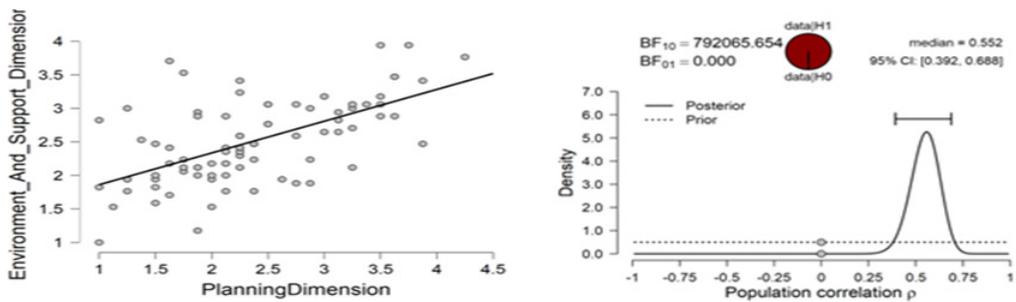
As illustrated in Figure 3, the relationship between the Planning Dimension and the Environment and Support Dimension is depicted. The scatter plot reveals a positive linear trend, where higher planning scores are associated with stronger perceptions of environmental and support factors. This association is confirmed by the Bayesian analysis, which yields a median correlation of $\rho = 0.552$ with a 95% Credible Interval of [0.392, 0.688] and a Bayes Factor (BF_{10}) of 7.92×10^5, providing decisive evidence for a significant positive correlation.

Table 4. Bayesian Correlation Matrix.

		Planning Dimension	Implementation Dimension	Evaluation Dimension	Environment and Support Dimension
Planning Dimension	Pearson's r	—			
	BF_{10}	—			
	Kendall's tau	—			
	BF_{10}	—			
Implementation Dimension	Pearson's r	0.607	—		
	BF_{10}	1.723e+7	—		
	Kendall's tau	0.458	—		
	BF_{10}	2.481e+7	—		
Evaluation Dimension	Pearson's r	0.565	0.420	—	
	BF_{10}	792066	351.5	—	
	Kendall's tau	0.406	0.283	—	
	BF_{10}	420037	202.4	—	
Environment And Support Dimension	Pearson's r	0.596	0.648	0.667	—
	BF_{10}	7.174e+6	5.227e+8	3.231e+9	—
	Kendall's tau	0.451	0.474	0.461	—
	BF_{10}	1.398e+7	9.708e+7	3.243e+7	—

Figure 5. Correlation Plot.
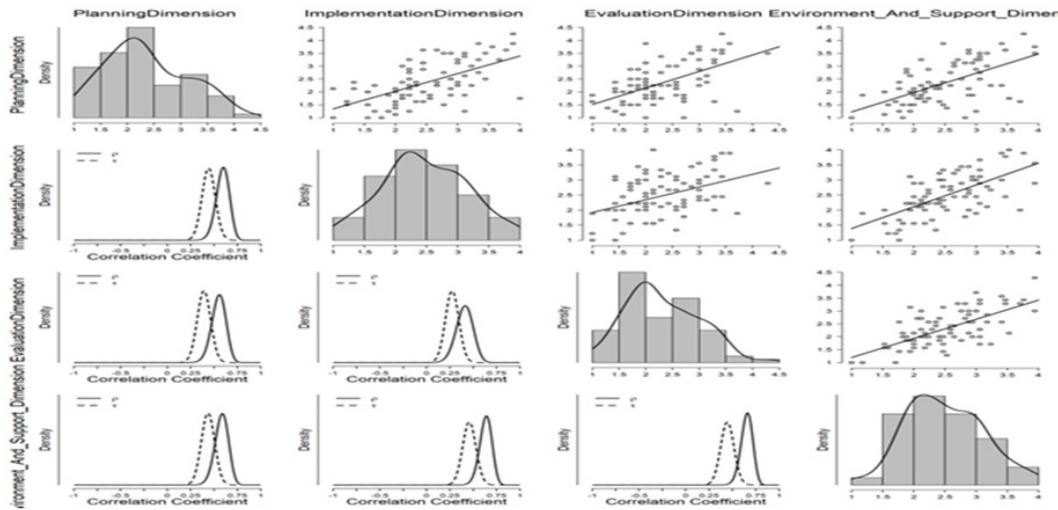
The Bayesian correlation analysis reveals strong positive associations among all dimensions. The Environment and Support Dimension show particularly strong correlations with the other three dimensions: Pearson's r values are 0.596 with Planning, 0.648 with Implementation, and 0.667 with Evaluation, all supported by extremely high Bayes Factors ($BF_{10}>10^6$), indicating decisive evidence for these relationships. Similarly, correlations among Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation Dimensions are moderately strong, with Pearson's r ranging from 0.420 to 0.607 and Bayes Factors consistently showing very strong to decisive support. Kendall's tau values support these trends, confirming consistent positive associations. Overall, the results indicate that all dimensions are positively and strongly related, with the Environment and Support Dimension having the strongest links across the framework, suggesting it plays a central role in the overall system.

Bayesian Linear Regression

To identify the best predictors of performance, a Bayesian linear regression analysis was performed. Table 4 compares alternative models, highlighting the probability of each given the observed data.

Table 5. Bayesian Linear Regression Model Comparison.

Models	P(M)	P(M|data)	BF_M	$Log(BF_{10})$	R^2
Implementation Dimension + Evaluation Dimension	0.083	0.513	11.597	0.000	0.485
Implementation Dimension + Evaluation Dimension + Environment And Support Dimension	0.250	0.465	2.612	-1.196	0.493
Implementation Dimension + Environment And Support Dimension	0.083	0.018	0.201	-3.351	0.439
Evaluation Dimension + Environment And Support Dimension	0.083	0.002	0.020	-5.642	0.406
Implementation Dimension	0.083	0.001	0.012	-6.167	0.369
Environment And Support Dimension	0.083	4.564e-4	0.005	-7.025	0.355
Evaluation Dimension	0.083	5.305e-5	5.836e-4	-9.177	0.319
Null model	0.250	2.818e-10	8.454e-10	-22.421	0.000

The model including both the Implementation and Evaluation Dimensions had the highest posterior probability (P(M|data) = 0.513). This model was 11.60 times more likely than the null model, providing strong support for its explanatory power. Posterior summaries of the regression coefficients (Table 5) provide further insight. The Implementation Dimension (BF_inclusion = 428.48) and Evaluation Dimension (BF_inclusion = 50.23) showed decisive evidence for inclusion in the model, whereas Environment and Support (BF_inclusion = 0.94) contributed only anecdotal evidence.

Table 6. Posterior Summaries of Coefficients.

Coefficient	Mean	SD	P(incl)	P(incl|data)	BF$_{inclusion}$	95% Credible Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Intercept	2.349	0.061	1.000	1.000	1.000	2.221	2.465
Implementation Dimension	0.452	0.114	0.500	0.998	428.482	0.202	0.670
Evaluation Dimension	0.367	0.124	0.500	0.980	50.226	0.090	0.602
Environment And Support Dimension	0.085	0.144	0.500	0.486	0.944	-0.105	0.425

The 95% credible intervals confirmed the importance of Implementation [0.202, 0.670] and Evaluation [0.090, 0.602] as predictors. By contrast, the interval for Environment and Support [-0.105, 0.425] crossed zero, suggesting that its contribution was not statistically credible.

Residual Diagnostics for Model Adequacy

The Residuals vs. Fitted plot from the Bayesian Model Averaging (BMA) regression indicates that while the model generally satisfies the homoscedasticity assumption, showing a relatively uniform spread of residuals across predicted values, there is a slight U-shaped curvature in the smoothed trend line. This pattern suggests a minor violation of the linearity assumption, with the model systematically under-predicting at low and high predicted values and over-predicting in the mid-range. No extreme outliers or influential points are evident. Overall, the model provides a reasonable fit, but predictive accuracy could likely be improved by incorporating potential non-linear relationships, such as quadratic terms, to better capture the observed pattern in the residuals.

Figure 6. Residuals vs. Fitted Plot.
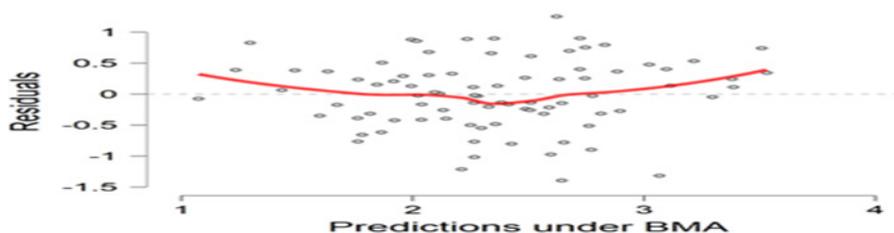
Bayesian One-Sample t-Tests

Bayesian one-sample t-tests were conducted to assess whether the mean scores of the four dimensions were credibly different from zero. The results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 7. Bayesian One-Sample t-Test Results.

Bayesian One Sample T-Test	Log(BF_{10})	error %
Planning Dimension	93.63	2.389e -43
Implementation Dimension	106.46	3.631e -49
Evaluation Dimension	101.69	6.067e -47
Environment And Support Dimension	116.02	8.016e -54

For all dimensions, the Log(BF_{10}) values far exceeded the threshold of 3, indicating extreme evidence that the mean values were significantly greater than zero.

Posterior distribution plots (see Figure 5) further confirm these findings. The 95% credible intervals for each dimension are far from zero, reinforcing their statistical credibility.

Comparison of Prior Beliefs and Posterior Evidence for the Mean of Each Dimension

The Bayesian one-sample t-test shows overwhelming evidence that the Planning Dimension mean is significantly greater than zero. The posterior distribution shifted sharply to the right, indicating a strong positive effect, with far greater certainty than the prior distribution suggested. The estimated mean was 2.988, with a 95% credible interval of [2.682, 3.346], which excludes zero and confirms the robustness of the finding. The Bayes Factor ($BF_{10} = 4.595 \times 10^{40}$) provides extreme evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis, demonstrating that the data are astronomically more likely under the assumption of a positive mean. Sequential analysis further reinforced these results, as evidence for the alternative hypothesis steadily accumulated with each additional observation.

In summary, the analysis confirms that the Planning Dimension is not only significantly positive but also central to the study framework, with results that are both statistically decisive and practically meaningful

Figure 6. Prior and Posterior Distributions from One-Sample T-Tests.
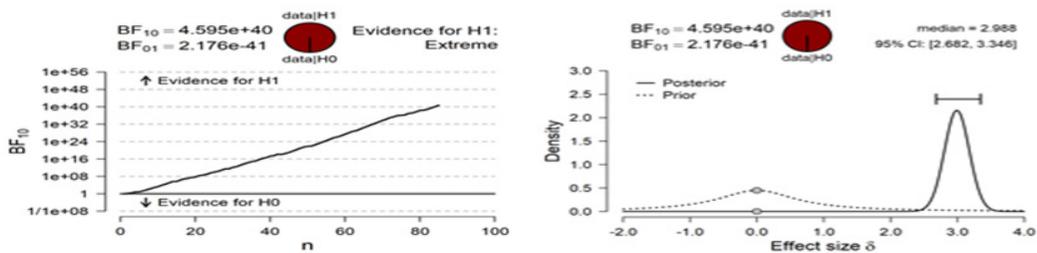
The Bayesian one-sample t-test provides conclusive evidence that the Implementation Dimension mean is significantly greater than zero. The posterior distribution shifted sharply to the right and became highly concentrated, reflecting strong certainty about a large positive effect. The estimated mean was 3.546, with a 95% credible interval of [3.190, 3.931], entirely above zero. This rules out the null hypothesis and confirms the robustness of the effect. The Bayes Factor ($BF_{10} = 1.716 \times 10^{46}$) represents extreme evidence, showing the data are virtually infinitely more likely under the alternative hypothesis than under the null. Sequential analysis further reinforced this, with evidence consistently strengthening as additional data were incorporated. In conclusion, the analysis moves from initial uncertainty to near-absolute certainty, establishing that the Implementation Dimension is not only positive but strongly and credibly so.

Figure 7. Prior and Posterior Distributions from One-Sample T-Tests.
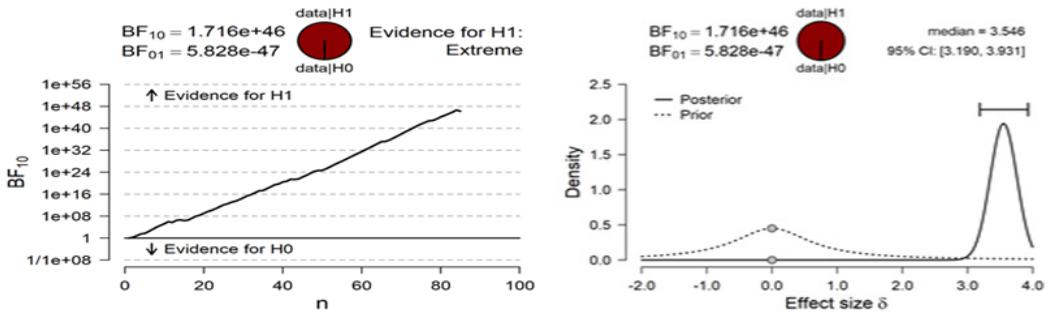
The Bayesian one-sample t-test provides overwhelming evidence that the Evaluation Dimension mean is significantly greater than zero. The posterior distribution shifted strongly to the right, becoming highly concentrated, which indicates strong certainty in a positive effect. The estimated mean was 3.323, with a 95% credible interval of [2.961, 3.707], entirely above zero. This rules out the null hypothesis and confirms the presence of a robust positive effect. The Bayes Factor ($BF_{10} = 1.451 \times 10^{44}$) shows extreme evidence, meaning the data are astronomically more likely under the alternative hypothesis than under the null. Sequential analysis confirmed the stability of this conclusion, with evidence consistently strengthening as more data were added.

In conclusion, the results demonstrate near-absolute certainty that the Evaluation Dimension reflects a large, credible positive effect.

Figure 8. Prior and Posterior Distributions from One-Sample T-Tests.
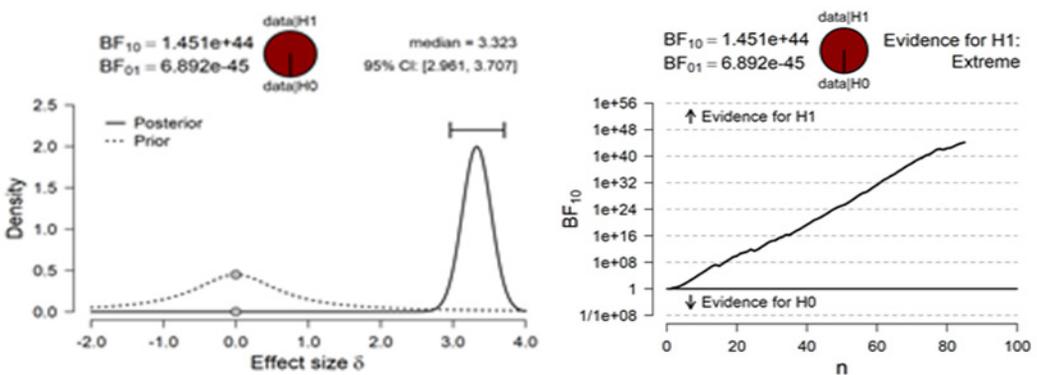
The Bayesian one-sample t-test provides extreme evidence that the mean of the Environment and Support Dimension is significantly greater than zero. The analysis reveals that the posterior distribution is tall, narrow, and shifted far to the right, indicating near-absolute certainty of a large positive effect. The mean estimate of the dimension is 3.985, with a 95% credible interval ranging from 3.607 to 4.385, which lies entirely above zero. This further reinforces the conclusion that the observed effect is both substantial and credible. The Bayes Factor ($BF_{10} = 2.427 \times 10^{50}$) demonstrates virtually infinite evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis relative to the null,

providing decisive statistical support. Sequential analysis confirmed that evidence for a positive effect was immediate, consistent, and strengthened rapidly as additional data were incorporated. In conclusion, the findings offer overwhelming and decisive support that the Environment and Support Dimension reflects a very strong and credible positive effect.

Figure 9. Prior and Posterior Distributions from One-Sample T-Tests.
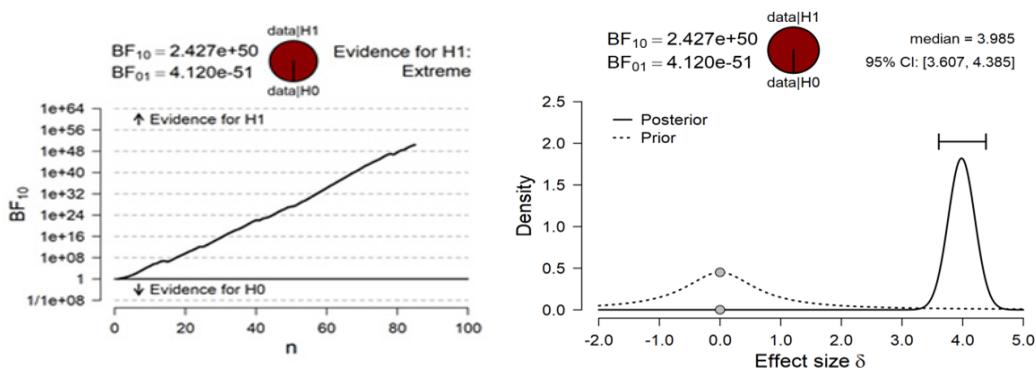
Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the centrality of educational planning in shaping the quality of secondary school performance in Somaliland. The strong and positive correlations between planning, implementation, evaluation, and environment/support dimensions suggest that these elements are mutually reinforcing and form an integrated framework for improving teacher and school effectiveness. This aligns with earlier arguments that planning is not a static administrative function but a dynamic, evidence-based process linking professional development, accountability, and responsiveness to societal needs (Anderson, 2004; Endo et al., 2025; Guskey, 2014). One of the most significant findings is the strong influence of implementation and evaluation dimensions on overall performance, as revealed by Bayesian regression analysis. These results resonate with prior studies that highlight the importance of systematic school-level planning in equipping teachers to adapt to curriculum changes, sustain professional growth, and maintain instructional quality (Kyriakides, 2012). The evidence suggests that when implementation strategies are supported by rigorous evaluation mechanisms, planning is translated into actionable practices that enhance teacher performance and student outcomes (Mahgoub et al., 2014).

Interestingly, while the environment and support dimension recorded the highest descriptive mean, its predictive power in regression analysis was limited. This indicates that although supportive environments and resources are valued by teachers, they alone are insufficient to drive significant improvements in performance without being coupled with strong planning, implementation, and evaluation strategies. This finding aligns with previous work arguing that resource availability must be embedded in systematic planning frameworks to be transformative (Chalmers, 2007; Natarajan, 2000). In this sense, planning remains the structural backbone that converts environmental support into meaningful educational improvements.

The results also emphasize the importance of evidence-based planning for addressing disparities in access, equity, and quality in fragile contexts like Somaliland (Dean & Sutherland, 2020). The decisive Bayesian evidence across all correlations suggests that planning interventions

cannot be considered in isolation but must be designed holistically, integrating evaluation feedback, professional development, and supportive environments. These findings support calls for participatory and data-driven planning frameworks that directly respond to institutional and societal needs (Gandrup, 2020; Schildkamp, 2019). A major strength of this study is the application of Bayesian statistical methods, which provide a more nuanced and robust interpretation of evidence compared to traditional frequentist approaches. The use of Bayes Factors allowed for decisive conclusions regarding the strength of associations, offering clearer insights into the interrelationships between planning dimensions. This methodological choice addresses recent scholarly calls for advanced statistical approaches in educational research to better capture complexity and uncertainty (Meng, 2023; Nugroho, 2024).

Implications

The findings carry several important implications for educational systems in fragile and developing contexts. First, the strong influence of implementation and evaluation suggests that planning frameworks must be operationalized through consistent monitoring, feedback loops, and capacity-building initiatives. Second, the limited predictive role of the environment/support dimension indicates that resource availability is not sufficient on its own; systems must embed these resources within structured planning mechanisms. Third, the results underscore the value of participatory and data-driven planning models, especially in countries where policy coherence and institutional stability are evolving.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the study was based on a relatively small sample of 85 participants, which may limit the generalizability of findings across all secondary schools in Somaliland. While Bayesian methods partially mitigate small-sample issues by incorporating prior information, broader studies with larger and more diverse samples are needed for stronger validation (Taylor et al., 2008). Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias, especially in contexts where teachers may feel pressured to provide favorable assessments (Ajani, 2023). Future studies could integrate classroom observations and longitudinal data to triangulate findings and provide deeper insights.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the study demonstrates that educational planning plays a decisive role in enhancing secondary school performance in Somaliland. Planning, implementation, evaluation, and environmental support function as interconnected components that collectively reinforce school effectiveness. The use of Bayesian methods strengthens confidence in the findings, offering robust evidence of the integrated nature of planning processes in contexts characterized by fragility and institutional challenges.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes important empirical evidence to the discourse on educational planning in fragile states. It highlights that in Somaliland, where institutional capacity and policy coherence remain challenges, strengthening evidence-based planning frameworks is critical to improving educational quality (Gandrup, 2020; Melesse & Obsiye, 2022). Specifically, the findings underscore that integrating teacher professional development with structured planning processes could bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities (Saad et al., 2021; Sultan & Allehaby, 2016). In practical terms, the study suggests that policymakers and school leaders should prioritize building robust planning and evaluation systems at the school level. Investment

in teacher professional development should be explicitly linked to these planning frameworks to maximize impact. Furthermore, participatory approaches that involve teachers in planning and evaluation processes could enhance ownership and sustainability of reforms (Ping He, 2024). By doing so, Somaliland's education sector can move towards a more coherent, accountable, and quality-driven secondary school system, contributing to broader social and economic development goals (Melesse & Obsiye, 2022).

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War of Words: A Commentary on Lifelong Learning Versus Continuous Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

This article engages in an intellectual battle, scrutinizing the intricate and often contentious relationship between lifelong learning (LLL) and continuous professional development (CPD). It casts a spotlight on their differences while confronting prevalent misconceptions, setting the stage for a war of words. Advocates of lifelong learning argue passionately for its broad scope and deep philosophical roots, promoting a vision of educational engagement that spans a lifetime. They paint LLL as a holistic approach that nurtures the human spirit and fosters continuous growth. Conversely, defenders of continuous professional development stake their claim, emphasizing its targeted focus on skill enhancement that is essential for navigating modern career paths. They assert that CPD is a necessary response to the fast-paced demands of today's job market, positioning it as a practical and indispensable complement to LLL. However, this perspective is not without its detractors. Critics argue that framing CPD as a response to LLL's shortcomings risks reducing lifelong learning's expansive potential, thereby neglecting its philosophical richness and broader purpose. This commentary positions itself within this charged discourse, asserting that while CPD may emerge from critiques of LLL, it simultaneously offers a focused framework that enhances the latter's comprehensive vision. By delving into the definitions, motivations, contexts, and critiques surrounding both concepts, we illuminate this critical dialogue as more than just a debate; it underscores the need for a deeper understanding of modern education. In this ongoing war of ideas, both sides must navigate their positions carefully, as the stakes are high for shaping the future of lifelong education. Ultimately, recognizing the complementary relationship between LLL and CPD is essential for fostering an educational framework that truly supports continuous growth and development.

KEYWORDS: lifelong learning, continuous professional development, modern education, progressive critical perspectives

Introduction

In our rapidly changing world, marked by technological advancements and shifting job markets, a fierce battle of ideas has erupted between lifelong learning (LLL) and continuous professional development (CPD) (Friedman, 2023). As societies navigate the complexities of globalization and the digital age, the call for ongoing learning becomes increasingly insistent. Advocates of lifelong learning argue passionately for its comprehensive approach, framing it as a lifelong commitment to education that transcends traditional boundaries (Kempf & Jonas, 2025). This philosophy promotes a mindset where learning is seen as an essential, continuous journey, enabling individuals to adapt and thrive amid societal changes. On the other side, proponents of continuous professional development assert that CPD is the practical counterpart to LLL, honing in on specific skills required for professional success (Sockalingam et al., 2022). They highlight CPD as a tactical response to a fiercely competitive job market, where the rapid obsolescence of skills demands a focused approach (Bradley & Chohan, 2024; Alemayehu, 2021, a). Workshops, seminars, and online courses are emphasized as critical tools for maintaining professional relevance

and ensuring upward mobility (Panda, 2025). This article will illustrate practical best practices and provide concrete examples of how LLL and CPD can be effectively integrated. Delving into this verbal skirmish, it will examine how LLL and CPD, while interconnected, often find themselves at odds. Lifelong learning champions an expansive vision, emphasizing personal fulfillment and civic responsibility, while CPD is frequently framed as a narrower means aimed at enhancing employability. The reduction of LLL to merely a collection of technical competencies undermines its larger purpose—cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and a passion for lifelong inquiry.

As we unpack the definitions, philosophies, and critiques of both concepts, it becomes evident that a contentious discourse exists, with both sides presenting valid arguments. Each claims its importance in shaping the future of education, yet the tendency to position CPD as a mere subset of LLL risks overshadowing the latter's broader mission. Understanding these distinctions is critical, as we seek not only to prepare individuals for professional challenges but also to empower them as informed, engaged citizens in an interconnected world. The discourse continues, reflecting a deeper ideological struggle that defines the educational landscape of our time. In this ongoing war of ideas, the resolution may lie in acknowledging the complementary roles of both LLL and CPD, as they together sculpt the pathways toward holistic educational experiences. Only by integrating best practices and embracing their interconnections can we move forward in fostering a learning environment that is both dynamic and responsive to the needs of our society.

The Concept of Lifelong Learning: An Overview
Definition and Scope

LLL is broadly defined as the continuous and committed pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional growth (El Amoud, 2024). Unlike traditional educational models that typically confine learning to formal schooling, LLL transcends boundaries, encompassing a multitude of learning formats (Nikoçeviq-Kurti, 2025). These include formal education, such as degree programs and certification courses, as well as informal learning experiences, self-directed study utilizing resources like books and online courses, and community engagement activities, such as volunteering or participating in local initiatives aimed at social betterment (Shaharuddin et al., 2022). This comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning is encapsulated in UNESCO's 2009 framework, which recognizes LLL as a crucial element of personal development, social inclusion, and active citizenship (Assefa, 2024; UNESCO, 2016). It emphasizes that learning should be viewed as an ongoing journey, fostering a culture where individuals continuously seek knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the complexities of modern life. The implications of LLL stretch across various sectors, such as education, healthcare, technology, and public service (Assefa, 2025). By promoting an ongoing learning culture, LLL redefines how we understand individual roles within society, asserting that education is a lifelong endeavor rather than a series of isolated events (Ovesni, 2025). This perspective encourages individuals to engage actively with their environments, continually adapting their skills and knowledge in response to new challenges and opportunities.

Historical Foundations

LLL's foundational ideas can be traced back to ancient philosophers such as Aristotle. He underscored the significance of knowledge accumulation as a lifelong pursuit, stressing that the quest for understanding is an integral component of human existence (Aspin, 2007). For Aristotle, the process of learning was deeply connected to the ideals of virtue and the good life, pointing out that education should not merely serve utilitarian purposes but rather foster moral and intellectual character (Carr, 2008). However, the contemporary interpretation of LLL has evolved

significantly, drawing heavily from modern educational philosophies, particularly constructivist theories of learning (Mohammed & Kınyo, 2020). These theories posit that learning is not a passive act of knowledge acquisition but an active and transformative process. Constructivism emphasizes engagement, reflection, and practical application as the cornerstones of effective learning. Individuals are seen as co-creators of knowledge, actively constructing meaning based on their experiences and interactions with the world.

In contrast, the concept of CPD emerged more recently, gaining prominence in the decades following World War II. Initially, it addressed the need for structured, post-qualification learning in professions like medicine, law, and engineering. By the 1950s and 60s, "Continuing Professional Development" became the term for maintaining and updating professional competence. In the UK, medical colleges and professional engineering institutions began to lead the way, followed by accountants, architects, and teachers. The evolution of CPD reflects a shift from casually enhancing knowledge to a more disciplined and structured approach, driven by increasingly litigious and technologically advanced environments. This shift has expanded beyond institutional bodies and is now embraced across various sectors. CPD's development varies across sectors:

Healthcare: CPD is mandatory for all healthcare professionals. It ensures that care is in accordance with the latest scientific discoveries and best clinical practices.

Technology: Given the rapid pace of technological advancements, CPD is crucial for tech professionals to stay updated with the latest knowledge and skills. It allows them to remain relevant and adapt to changing demands

Public Sector: CPD is generally mandatory for all staff in all industries within the public sector, including health, education, and central and local government.

Construction: The CPD Certification Service originated in the UK construction industry to ensure professionals remain up-to-date with technological expertise.

Globally, CPD is prioritized through diverse regulatory frameworks and cultural values. Some regions, like Northern Europe, strongly emphasize lifelong learning, supported by governmental policies encouraging ongoing education and skills enhancement.

Progressive Critical Perspectives

In this context, thinkers such as Ivan Illich have advocated for a radical rethinking of educational paradigms. Illich argued that education should extend far beyond vocational training or the mere transfer of information (Assefa, 2022; Zaldívar, 2015). He envisioned an approach that facilitates active societal participation and transformation, which fundamentally aligns with the lifelong learning paradigm (Shah et al., 2024). Illich proposed that individuals should reclaim their educational experiences, viewing learning as a continuous inquiry that is integral to their identity, rather than a discrete phase confined to formal schooling. Illich's ideas challenge traditional notions of education as a structured system, suggesting instead that learning can and should happen in various forms and contexts. His philosophy suggests that true education empowers individuals to engage critically with society, enabling them to question established norms and participate actively in shaping their communities.

Conceptual Model: Interplay Between LLL and CPD

To illustrate the interplay between LLL and CPD, a conceptual model can be proposed. This model positions LLL as a broad, overarching framework that encompasses all forms of learning over a lifetime, while CPD acts as a specialized component focused on the specific needs of professional growth.

Core Principles of LLL:
Active Participation: Individuals engage in learning experiences throughout their lives.
Holistic Development: Learning is viewed as essential for personal, social, and professional growth.
Components of CPD:
Structured Learning: CPD involves organized training sessions, workshops, and courses tailored to specific professional competencies.
Feedback Mechanisms: Reflection and assessment are integral to CPD, ensuring continuous improvement of skills.
Interactions in the Model:
Bidirectional Influence: LLL fosters a mindset that enhances the effectiveness of CPD by encouraging self-directed learning, while CPD provides practical applications for the concepts explored in LLL.
Shared Goals: Both constructs aim to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills tailored to navigate the complexities of their environments effectively.

Themes of Agency and Autonomy

Further philosophical engagement with LLL reveals its deep connections to the themes of personal agency, autonomy, and critical thinking. Lifelong learning promotes self-directed learning, which empowers individuals to take charge of their educational journeys. This empowerment is crucial in a world characterized by rapid change and an influx of information, where the ability to learn independently is essential. The emphasis on agency within LLL supports a mindset oriented toward exploration and adaptability. Individuals are encouraged to pursue knowledge based on their interests and circumstances rather than adhering to predefined educational paths. This shift fosters resilience and adaptability, equipping learners to navigate the complexities of modern life effectively.

The Role of Reflection

Additionally, the philosophical underpinnings of LLL advocate for reflective practices as a means of enhancing learning experiences. Reflective practice encourages learners to think critically about their experiences, facilitating deeper understanding and personal growth. This process allows individuals to assess their learning journeys, identify gaps in knowledge, and adjust their strategies in response to their evolving needs and contexts. In summary, the philosophical foundations of lifelong learning encompass a rich tapestry of historical insights and modern interpretations. From the early emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge by thinkers like Aristotle to the transformative ideals proposed by contemporaries such as Ivan Illich, LLL champions the notion that education is a dynamic, lifelong endeavor. By promoting agency, autonomy, critical thinking, and reflective practices, lifelong learning equips individuals to thrive in an ever-changing world, reinforcing the idea that continuous inquiry is essential to personal and societal development.

Motivations for Lifelong Learning

The motivations for engaging in lifelong learning are multifaceted, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivations often stem from a personal desire for self-improvement, intellectual curiosity, and passion for particular fields of knowledge. Conversely, extrinsic motivations may include the pursuit of career advancement, compliance with job requirements, or the need to remain competitive in a rapidly changing job market. The importance of motivation in lifelong learning cannot be overstated. Theories such as Self-Determination Theory (Salikhova et al., 2021) emphasize that intrinsic motivation—learning for the sake of learning—can lead to higher levels of engagement and satisfaction. Individuals who pursue knowledge out of genuine interest and passion usually demonstrate a stronger commitment to their educational pursuits. This emotional connection to learning not only enhances personal transformation but also fosters deeper, more durable understanding. Additionally, external factors such as socioeconomic conditions, workplace cultures, and technological advancements can significantly influence individuals' motivation to engage in lifelong learning. For instance, organizations that prioritize continuous learning and professional development create environments that support employees in pursuing new skills, while also fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation.

Contextual Relevance

In today's context, the relevance of lifelong learning has become increasingly pronounced due to rapid technological advancements and globalization, which present unique challenges and opportunities for individuals and societies. As industries evolve and skills become obsolete, lifelong learning emerges as a critical mechanism for individuals to adapt, acquire new competencies, and maintain relevance within their fields. The World Economic Forum's 2016 report highlighted the urgent need for continuous learning in a job market where technology and processes change swiftly, necessitating that individuals remain agile in their learning approaches. Moreover, LLL also plays a significant role in addressing larger societal challenges. In the face of pressing issues such as climate change, social inequality, and political unrest, lifelong learning fosters critical thinking and equips individuals with the tools to engage meaningfully with complex problems. This holistic approach to education encourages individuals to develop a nuanced understanding of societal dynamics, promoting informed and active global citizenship. By cultivating a culture that values continuous inquiry and adaptability, LLL not only enhances individual capability but also contributes to building resilient communities that can meet the challenges of an unpredictable future. Ultimately, lifelong learning serves as more than an educational philosophy; it is a framework for personal and societal advancement in a world characterized by perpetual change.

Understanding Continuous Professional Development
Definition and Scope

CPD is defined as the ongoing process of acquiring new skills, knowledge, and competencies relevant to one's professional context (Alemayehu, 2021, b). This concept goes beyond mere training; it represents a holistic and structured approach aimed at enhancing a professional's ability to meet the demands of their specific role within an organization or industry. CPD is typically guided by defined professional and organizational goals, ensuring alignment with the requirements of job roles, industry standards, and future employment trends. CPD encompasses a wide array of activities designed to bolster individuals' competencies. These include formal educational programs such as degree certifications and specialized training courses, as well as workshops and seminars that provide targeted skill enhancement. Additionally, CPD recognizes the importance of experiential

learning—where professionals gain insights through real-world experiences—and mentoring relationships that offer personalized guidance. Moreover, CPD embraces informal and self-directed learning, enabling individuals to pursue knowledge through reading, online resources, and reflective practices. This broad perspective on CPD allows professionals to engage with their development in ways that best align with their personal learning styles and the unique challenges presented by their professional environments. For instance, while one individual might thrive in structured classroom settings, another may prefer self-directed projects or collaborative peer learning.

The Context of CPD

The significance of CPD has surged in various sectors, including education, healthcare, and technology, where remaining updated with the latest knowledge, practices, and innovations is essential (Assefa, & Zenebe, 2024). In the education sector, teachers are frequently required to participate in CPD to adapt their pedagogical approaches in response to new curricula, educational standards, and emerging technologies. This continuous engagement fosters an environment where educators can refine their teaching methods, ultimately benefiting students through improved educational outcomes. Similarly, in healthcare, professionals are mandated to engage in CPD to stay abreast of the latest medical research, treatment protocols, and regulatory requirements. For example, doctors and nurses must undertake ongoing training to maintain their licenses, thereby ensuring they provide evidence-based and safe care to patients. The technology sector, characterized by rapid change, also demands that professionals continually update their skills to remain competitive. Here, CPD includes learning new programming languages, software tools, or methodologies that are crucial for career progression. Many professional organizations play a pivotal role in establishing standards for CPD, requiring members to engage in regular training, skills assessments, and reflective practices. Such regulatory frameworks not only underscore the importance of CPD for professional development but also position it as essential for career advancement across various fields. By instituting requirements for ongoing education, these organizations emphasize the commitment to lifelong learning and the necessity of maintaining industry relevancy.

Motivations for Continuous Professional Development

The primary motivator for engaging in CPD is the desire for professional competency and employability. Professionals often pursue CPD as a strategic initiative to enhance their skills and ensure their qualifications remain relevant in a competitive job market. The motivations driving individuals towards CPD are influenced by a confluence of personal ambition, organizational expectations, and industry standards. For many, continuous development is seen as critical for career advancement. The pursuit of new skills and knowledge can lead to enhanced job performance, greater job satisfaction, and increased prospects for upward mobility. In this context, acquiring additional credentials—such as certifications or advanced degrees—can significantly impact one's employability, making professionals more attractive candidates for promotions or new opportunities. Moreover, individual motivations for CPD can be reflected in intrinsic desires for personal growth, mastery of a craft, or passion for particular disciplines. When professionals are genuinely invested in their fields, their commitment to CPD often translates into high levels of engagement, resulting in not just career advancements, but also personal fulfillment and a sense of purpose in their work.

Critique of CPD

   Despite its integral role in workforce development, CPD faces criticism for its inherent focus on specific skill sets. Critics argue that an excessive emphasis on narrowly defined competencies can lead to a transactional approach to education, where the nuances of learning and personal growth are sidelined. This limited view overlooks the broader learning experiences that contribute to individuals' holistic development. For instance, scholar Stephen Brookfield (1986) emphasizes that education should serve a dual purpose: fulfilling professional objectives while also nurturing critical consciousness and personal reflection. When CPD prioritizes a narrow definition of skill acquisition, it risks undermining the transformative potential of education. By focusing solely on practical competencies, CPD may neglect the ethical dimensions of professional practice, the development of critical thinking, and the encouragement of civic responsibility. However, it is essential to recognize that well-designed CPD frameworks can effectively incorporate elements of reflection, ethics, and critical thinking, thereby enhancing their overall impact on professional growth. For example, CPD programs that include reflective practices encourage participants to evaluate their experiences and decisions critically, fostering a deeper understanding of their professional roles and responsibilities.

   Moreover, integrating ethical considerations within CPD can promote the development of a moral compass in professionals, enabling them to navigate complex dilemmas in their fields. Programs that emphasize ethical reasoning create a space for individuals to engage in discussions about the implications of their actions, fostering a sense of accountability to their communities and professions. Additionally, embedding critical thinking skills into CPD curricula can empower professionals to assess challenges holistically and make informed decisions that benefit not only their careers but also the broader society. This critique raises important considerations about the design and implementation of CPD programs. Rather than merely equipping professionals with technical skills, CPD initiatives should strive to foster an environment conducive to holistic growth. This means actively integrating opportunities for self-reflection, ethical reasoning, and critical engagement with broader societal issues, thereby creating a more comprehensive professional development experience. By doing so, CPD can transform into a more dynamic and enriching process that not only promotes technical competencies but also cultivates well-rounded individuals prepared to contribute meaningfully to their professions and communities.

Mutual Misunderstandings: LLL vs. CPD
Perceptions of Lifelong Learning vs. Continuous Professional Development

   The ongoing discourse surrounding LLL and CPD is characterized by a true war of words that reflects a series of misunderstandings regarding their respective purposes, outcomes, and contributions to personal and professional growth. Advocates of LLL fiercely criticize CPD for being overly utilitarian and narrowly focused, suggesting that such an approach reduces the rich, multifaceted nature of education to mere job training. This perspective posits that CPD could undermine the intrinsic benefits of acquiring knowledge for personal enrichment and self-actualization, which are central tenets of the lifelong learning philosophy. From this standpoint, LLL is celebrated for its emphasis on continuous inquiry, curiosity, and the personal journey of self-discovery, fueling the ongoing war of words. Conversely, proponents of CPD retaliate, arguing that LLL lacks practical application, asserting that it fails to adequately prepare individuals for the specific demands and realities of professional life. This combative viewpoint leads to the belief that CPD is essential in providing the structured, goal-oriented direction necessary for impactful learning efforts that LLL does not inherently offer. As a result, CPD is often defended as an indispensable mechanism for ensuring that professionals remain relevant and competent in their roles, sparking yet

another front in this war of words over the merits of structured training versus the open explorations of lifelong learning.

Illustrative Case Studies

To illuminate this contentious clash, consider two hypothetical professionals: a teacher engaged in ongoing training workshops and another individual embodying the spirit of lifelong learning by exploring diverse topics outside their immediate field of expertise. The teacher might be viewed as merely fulfilling regulatory requirements set by educational authorities, perpetuating the notion that CPD is a reactive approach to skill enhancement. Critics may vehemently assert that such participation merely ticks boxes without facilitating genuine, transformative learning experiences, amplifying the ongoing war of words about the effectiveness of CPD. In stark contrast, the lifelong learner may be lauded for their intellectual curiosity, embarking on a journey of exploration across multiple disciplines. This individual is often praised for their commitment to personal growth, fostering a broad knowledge base that may not be immediately applicable to their career but enriches their worldview. While these distinct narratives highlight the perceived dichotomy between LLL and CPD, it's essential to recognize that both individuals engage in valuable learning processes that can—and often should—be complementary, challenging the war of words that seeks to separate them.

The teacher's commitment to professional development could be significantly enriched by integrating principles of lifelong learning into their practice, creating an intersection that challenges the combative nature of this war of words. For instance, through an inquiry-based approach to their CPD, the teacher might explore methods for fostering creativity and critical thinking in their students, drawing from topics unrelated to standard curriculum requirements. This interdisciplinary exploration can lead to a more holistic educational experience for both the teacher and their students, effectively bridging the gap between structured professional development and broader learning pursuits, further illustrating the complexities of this war of words.

Broader Implications

The stakes in the rhetoric surrounding LLL and CPD extend far beyond mere theoretical musings; they have significant implications for educational policy, professional development frameworks, and the overall growth of individuals and communities. Misunderstanding the relationship between LLL and CPD can hinder the development of educational policies that effectively contribute to both individual and collective growth. Policymakers and educational leaders must grasp that these concepts are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interdependent, engaged in a persistent battle for recognition in this ongoing war of words. When educational institutions foster collaboration between LLL and CPD, they open doors to more cohesive and integrated learning environments. For instance, a curriculum that weaves together the components of lifelong learning—such as curiosity-driven inquiry and reflective practices—with structured CPD opportunities cultivates a culture of dynamic learning. This alignment encourages professionals to pursue knowledge that not only fulfills immediate job requirements but also fosters their development as engaged citizens and lifelong learners, bridging divisions in this war of words.

Moreover, embracing the symbiotic relationship between LLL and CPD can promote a more adaptable workforce, ready to face the rigors and unpredictability of modern challenges. By developing policies and practices that value both structured training and expansive learning, educational institutions can help ensure that individuals are not only equipped with the necessary skills for their current roles but also remain open to continual adaptation and growth throughout

their careers. In this ongoing war of words, the resolution may lie in recognizing the harmonious coexistence of these two critical concepts rather than allowing them to remain in conflict.

Divergent Pathways and Interconnections

Navigating Different Pathways

LLL and CPD represent two distinct yet interconnected educational pathways engaged in a subtle war of words. While LLL emphasizes broadening horizons, nurturing a genuine love for learning, and fostering personal growth, CPD zeroes in on targeted skill acquisition with a specific aim of career advancement. This divergence, however, does not diminish the vital interconnection between the two concepts; rather, both serve distinct yet overlapping purposes in the educational landscape, each bringing unique benefits that can enhance the overall learning experience. LLL encourages individuals to pursue knowledge across various domains, promoting exploration that extends well beyond formal education. It embraces curiosity and the pursuit of passions, emphasizing the importance of learning as a lifelong endeavor. In contrast, CPD focuses on the acquisition of specific skills and competencies necessary to meet job requirements and stay relevant within one's profession, fueling its own narrative in this ongoing war of words. This focused approach responds to the immediate demands of the workforce, ensuring that individuals are equipped with the tools and knowledge needed to perform effectively in their roles.

Synergistic Opportunities

Exploring the intersections of LLL and CPD can unveil numerous opportunities for synergy that enhance both learning frameworks. Organizations can cultivate environments where continuous professional development is framed as an integral part of a more comprehensive lifelong learning strategy. This involves integrating elements of personal development, critical inquiry, and holistic learning into CPD programs, which allows employees to engage with their learning in more meaningful ways—a point of contention in the war of words between the two concepts. For instance, companies may implement mentorship programs that encourage employees to share their lifelong learning experiences alongside their professional competencies. Such exchanges can foster a culture of continuous growth and reflection, where individuals are inspired to pursue knowledge beyond their immediate job requirements. This mentorship can lead to a cross-pollination of ideas, as colleagues learn from each other's diverse experiences and insights, further blurring the lines drawn in this war of words. Moreover, organizations can create initiatives that recognize and celebrate both structured CPD and informal, spontaneous learning experiences. By valuing a range of learning modalities, employers can motivate employees to take ownership of their professional journeys while also encouraging broader engagement with personal interests that can indirectly enrich their work. In doing so, organizations can bridge the gap between LLL and CPD, proving that instead of being in conflict, they can be allies in the quest for knowledge a crucial point in the ongoing war of words in education.

Implications for Teaching and Learning Practices

To facilitate a synergistic relationship between LLL and CPD, educational institutions and professional development providers must actively seek to merge the principles of lifelong learning into their CPD offerings, creating a powerful alliance in this ongoing war of words. Here are several strategic approaches to achieve this integration:

Incorporating Reflective Practices: Educators and trainers should encourage professionals to engage in reflection on their experiences and learning processes. This fosters a culture of critical thinking and introspection. Activities such as journaling, peer discussions, or structured mentoring relationships can prompt individuals to contemplate their learning journeys, thereby enriching the dialogue in this war of words.

Promoting Interdisciplinary Learning: Encouraging professionals to explore topics outside their immediate field can significantly enhance creativity and adaptability. For example, a healthcare professional might benefit from enrolling in communication or leadership courses, which improve collaboration with peers and enhance patient interactions. This cross-disciplinary approach highlights the potential for collaboration rather than conflict in the war of words between LLL and CPD.

Evaluating Learning Outcomes Holistically: Organizations should assess not only technical competencies but also personal growth and critical engagement. Developing comprehensive assessment frameworks that measure professional growth alongside personal development provides a more nuanced understanding of an individual's progress, challenging simplistic narratives in this war of words.

Implications for Policy and Practice
Policy Directions

Educators and policymakers must reflect on the implications of the relationship between LLL and CPD in shaping contemporary and future educational policies. The intentional integration of these frameworks can yield well-rounded professionals equipped to navigate modern workplace complexities. Here are three actionable policy recommendations:

Creating Flexible Learning Pathways: Educational policies should advocate for pathways that allow individuals to incorporate elements of both LLL and CPD throughout different life stages. This could involve offering diverse learning modalities—such as online courses, workplace training, and community education—that cater to varying student needs and preferences, addressing the ongoing war of words about flexibility in education. However, a key challenge is ensuring that these pathways do not become overly fragmented. Without a cohesive framework, learners might find themselves navigating a disjointed educational experience, leading to confusion and a lack of clear direction in their professional development. Moreover, the availability and accessibility of these pathways must be carefully monitored to prevent any inequities that could arise for underrepresented or marginalized groups.

Financial Support for Ongoing Development: Governments and organizations should consider providing financial incentives for individuals engaging in both LLL and CPD, acknowledging the intrinsic value of continuous learning across the lifespan. Initiatives could include scholarships, grants, or tax incentives aimed at educational pursuits related to both frameworks, fostering an environment where the ongoing war of words about funding for education can be addressed constructively. Nevertheless, it is crucial to contemplate the equitable distribution of these resources. If financial support is not allocated fairly, individuals from low-income backgrounds or those in underserved communities may still face barriers to access. Policymakers must ensure that

programs are designed to reach and uplift those who may need support the most, ensuring that funding mechanisms are inclusive and effective.

Community Partnerships: Collaboration between universities, vocational institutions, and industry associations can effectively facilitate lifelong learning initiatives while addressing the specific needs of various sectors. Such partnerships can lead to innovative and responsive approaches to skill development, ultimately creating pathways that reflect both the local labor market and global trends, contributing to an evolving war of words around community engagement in education. However, a significant consideration is the need for sustained commitment from all partners involved. Organizational goals and priorities can shift over time, which may jeopardize continuity in these partnerships. Establishing clear, long-term agreements and regularly reassessing the partnership's goals are vital to ensure that these collaborative efforts remain effective and relevant. Additionally, ongoing communication and shared vision among all stakeholders are necessary to foster a sense of shared responsibility and accountability.

Practical Applications in Various Fields

The implications of integrating LLL and CPD span numerous sectors, including education, healthcare, and corporate training, each benefiting from this comprehensive approach:

In Education: Educational institutions can redesign teacher training programs to emphasize lifelong learning competencies. Required courses could encompass pedagogical techniques as well as critical thinking and personal development, equipping educators with the tools to foster a more enriching learning environment for students, transforming the war of words around teacher development.

In Healthcare: Continuous professional development within healthcare settings can greatly benefit from incorporating elements of LLL. For instance, healthcare practitioners might engage in community dialogues focused on health literacy and well-being. These discussions promote a broader understanding of health issues while nurturing a sense of personal responsibility among practitioners and patients alike, enriching the war of words on health education.

In Business: Corporations can adopt strategies that empower employees to pursue lifelong learning while honing their professional skills. This can take the form of innovative training programs encouraging exploration of diverse subjects, facilitating cross-disciplinary initiatives that enhance collaboration and problem-solving capabilities, ultimately shifting the war of words toward a more collaborative learning environment.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding LLL and CPD represents a crucial exploration of education's nature and purpose in today's context, engendering an ongoing war of words between the two approaches. While LLL presents a vision of education as a continuous journey characterized by intellectual curiosity and personal growth, CPD addresses the immediate needs of the workforce by prioritizing skill enhancement. This tension underscores the critical conversation about what education should achieve. This intricate relationship invites us to move beyond the notion of a dichotomy to view LLL and CPD as complementary concepts, engaged in a collaborative war of words that reveals their interdependencies. The interplay between these frameworks defines the educational landscape and shapes how individuals navigate their professional and personal development. By reconciling these perspectives, we can foster a richer understanding of what it means to learn and grow. By recognizing the strengths of both approaches, we can cultivate a more integrated, responsive, and holistic educational framework that prepares individuals for the demands of their careers while

enriching their lives as engaged and informed citizens. As educators and policymakers work to foster collaborative environments where lifelong learning and continuous professional development coexist, they can enhance the educational experience. This approach empowers individuals to thrive in their personal and professional journeys, underscoring the significance of this war of words in shaping educational practices. Understanding the interconnectedness of LLL and CPD not only enhances individual capabilities but also contributes to establishing resilient community's adept at navigating an increasingly complex global landscape. In this ongoing war of words, the ultimate goal is to find common ground that champions lifelong learning while appreciating the vital role of continuous professional development in a rapidly evolving world.

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Perceived Factors Affecting the Strategy Implementation Practices in Comprehensive Universities in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess factors influencing the strategy implementation practices in public comprehensive universities in Ethiopia. A quantitative research method with Simple random sampling method was used to pick up 320 participants across the eight comprehensive universities in Ethiopia, in which 317 participants responded. Questionnaires were utilized to collect data for the study, which was then analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive analysis, such as mean values and standard deviation, and regression analysis were utilized. The study concludes that strategic leadership, top management commitment, resource allocation, communication, stakeholder's involvement, employee empowerment, organizational structure and culture and other organizational aspect positively influence strategic implementation. Based on the finding, the study recommended that for effective implementation of strategy implementation, comprehensive universities should strive to embrace effective leadership and management commitment, resource allocation, effective communication, organizational structure and culture, and employee empowerment.

Introduction

"Strategy implementation" encompasses two fundamental concepts: "strategy" and "implementation." According to Henry, (2021) "Strategy" is defined as "a specific action, usually but not always accompanied by the development of resources, to achieve an objective determined in strategic planning." Similarly, implementation is concerned with 'how' to get the organization from where it is now to where it should be tomorrow. Strategy implementation is "the action that moves the organization along its choice of route towards its goal, the fulfillment of its mission, the achievement of its vision" (Tawse &Tabesh, 2021). It is the accomplishment of strategies to achieve the organizational long term goals. Strategy execution is a vital competitive approach for achieving the targeted goals and objectives while also achieving superior performance. Friesl, et.al, (2021) argues that the implementation practice is devastating to all managerial activities, such as rewards, encouragement, monitoring and evaluation including flowing strategy across all functional areas to achieve the desired goals and improve policy implementation. As a result, it is worth noting that many higher education institutions worldwide, including those in Ethiopia, face challenges in executing their strategies, as well as competition from leadership in national and international markets.

Ethiopia's higher education reform has progressed significantly since 1950. However, since the 1990s, the higher education system has been constantly changing in terms of funding, policies, law, politics, sociology, and demographics. Significant technical progress, globalization, and changing environmental conditions are all significant. Since 1991, Ethiopian higher education has undergone a massive reform that includes new education and training policy, Education sector development programs, the establishment of new universities, increased enrollment, new courses, continuous assessment, harmonization, revised curricula, the introduction of a cost-sharing scheme, peer learning, modularization, university differentiation, exit examination, the establishment of quality assurance instruments to improve and ensure the quality of higher education, and the development of an education development roadmap as well as the introduction of the balanced scorecard model for strategic management practices, which considers four diverse views: financial, customer, internal business, and innovation and learning (Kaplan &Norton,2005). These changes have had little positive impact on the quality and relevance of higher education institutions core processes (teaching and learning, research, and community services). However, according to Education sector development program (ESDP-VI) and other sources these reforms that were implemented to make higher education institutions more effective and efficient failed owing to the low implementation of strategies among Ethiopian higher education institutions, resulting in the inability to effectively realize higher education's mission and objectives (Ministry of Education, 2021).

In line with this, the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-2030) stated that universities are committed to improving their governance structures, strategy development, strategy implementation, and leadership competence by professionalizing leadership and management in order to increase efficiency and achieve their various missions(Ministry of education,2018). This suggests that most higher education institutions, especially comprehensive universities that employ strategic management approaches, focus on developing paper plans rather than putting those plans into action to create consistent results. Ali & Mohan (2021) conducted research on factors influencing strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategy evaluation, and found evidence of effective strategy implementation by various Ethiopian higher education institutions. Some higher education institutions lack knowledge about of strategy implementation procedures, while others are aware but are not properly applying them. These studies identified practical and conceptual gaps, including problems and irregularities in implementing efficiently and effectively strategies due to lack of skills to adopt strategies, lack of institutional autonomy, lack of awareness of strategy implementation process within organizations, absence of stakeholders participation in the strategic management process, limited flexibility in strategy implementation, lack of good governance, and motivating employees towards efficient and effective implementation of strategies.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to assess the perceived factors affecting strategy implementation in comprehensive universities in Ethiopia. This study aims to contribute to strategic management fields by exploring the existing body of knowledge (conceptual gap) while also addressing a practical gap by determining the most important factors affecting strategy implementation (SI). Furthermore, it will help the higher education sector and policymakers by demonstrating viable ways to apply strategic management in Ethiopia.

Research Question
The study was guided by the following research question:
What are the perceived factors that are hindering the implementation of the strategies in public comprehensive universities in Ethiopia?"

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical lens can be used in directing the development of research questions, in defining the appropriate research design, developing data collection tools, providing explanation, understanding, and meaning to research while also increasing the value, rigor, credibility of research findings and generalizing the results of the study(Giroux, 2023). Similarly, the importance of theories in quantitative research includes clarification of ontological dispositions, identification of the logic behind methodological choices, testing theory as a result of research findings, and guidance as a framework for the study (Leeming, 2022). Accordingly, this study was guided by two theories, namely institutional theory and the resource-based theory (RBT), to establish a useful theoretical foundation for thinking about strategy implementation in comprehensive universities in Ethiopia.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory entails the examination of structure, norms, and practices that influence organizations and societies, highlighting how formal and informal institutions shape organizational behavior and decision-making while also serving as catalysts for institutional change (Risi, et.al 2023). It explores how social choices are shaped, mediated, and channeled by the institutional environment. As a result, institutions understood granted beliefs, rules, and norms shape the creation and spreading of organizational forms, design features, and practices to gain legitimacy, decrease uncertainty, and increase intelligibility of the organization's actions and activities (Risi, et.al 2023). The theory was applicable in the study because it sheds light on the ideology that public universities in Ethiopia can improve organizations and puts institutions at the core of the analysis of organizations' design. Also, organizations can't be understood in a vacuum, but host of environmental factors(legal, social, political, & cultural) rooted in the larger institutional context, should be considered (Risi et al., 2023). This perspective emphasizes the importance of examining how external influences shape organizational behavior and effectiveness. By considering these environmental factors, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how public universities can enhance organizational performance in Ethiopia.

Resource-Based Theory

The resource-based theory (dynamic capabilities theory) investigates how organizations integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external firm-specific abilities to create new competencies that are appropriate for their dynamic environment This implies that firms with higher dynamic capabilities will outperform those with lower dynamic capabilities (Paauwe, 2024). The idea describes how organizations can employ strategy implementation components to gain and maintain a competitive edge over other firms. The theory's goal is to understand how organizations achieve zero-level capabilities, which relate to how an organization earns a livelihood by selling the same product, on the same scale, to the same clients (Zehra, 2021). An institution has a capability if it has the minimum ability to accomplish a task, regardless of whether it is done well or poorly. The resource-based theory was relevant to the study because it put light on the idea that public universities in Ethiopia can improve service delivery by implementing new modifications offered by quality assurance agencies, specifically the Education and Training Authority (ETA). According to the theory, strategy implementation is influenced by strategic leadership, top management commitment, resource, employee empowerment, organizational structure and culture, and other factors of the organization. Furthermore, if properly managed, participatory leadership style, delegation, promotion, and training can all improve and facilitate strategy execution in any competitive institution (Malhotra et al., 2025).

Empirical Review of Literature on Strategy Implementation

This sub section of the study present various scholars' views on strategy implementation. Strategy is a pattern of decisions (Kogut, et.al. 2023); aspirations, practices, and a set of activities (Zambrano & Gutierrez, 2022). According to Bush & Coleman 2022& Perot, 2024), strategy involves the investigation of the major initiatives, setting clear and achievable objectives, establishing objectives and setting priorities to forecast the external environment and the organization's capacities, developing an action plan, allocation of resources, designing effective methods of implementation, and understanding both the internal & external environment. Strategy implementation is the second phase is considered as the hardest and most dynamic stage, where employees and managers are all involved, which entails putting created strategies into action to gain a competitive edge. It demands strong leadership, clear communication, and good change management (Ocak, et.al, 2022&Ogaja and Kimiti, 2016). According to Tedla (2019), putting a strategy into action requires different factors to successfully implement a strategy, such as enough resources, effective leadership, clearly defined decision-making processes, an organizational structure, a supportive culture, sophisticated information and communication technology, an effective monitoring and evaluation system, efficient reward and motivation systems, effective channels for communication, educational initiatives. Okibo and Agili (2019) discovered a positive relationship between strategic leadership and strategy implementation. Leadership practice is based on the notion of using strategy in all decision-making. A more thoughtful management strategy can lead to higher workplace success if a variety of aspects are addressed before taking action. James, et.al (2017) observed that there is a link between strategy implementation and commercial bank performance in Nairobi, Kenya. The study concluded that leadership commitment to an organization's strategic direction is critical, and that top management must make every effort to persuade, inspire, motivate, and encourage employees in order to generate valuable ideas for effective strategy implementation.

Aluko (2019) investigated the impact of culture on organizational performance in Nigerian textile firms. According to the study, the beliefs and attitudes of employees have a major impact on organizational performance. Riany (2019) investigated the impact of restructuring on the performance of mobile phone service providers in Kenya, and discovered that organizational culture is crucial in organizational transformation. Furthermore, Karani and Bichange (2017) investigated the effects of total quality management implementation on business performance and 54% of respondents agreed that organizational culture influences change implementation. Awadh &Saad (2013) examined the relationship between organizational culture and performance and discovered a statistical correlation between cultural variables such as norms and values and firm performance. The study finds that executives with a forward-thinking perspective can develop a strong company culture. Mopeni, et.al (2018) demonstrated that strategy execution in any organization is determined by workers' mental beliefs. Employees should have a shared vision that promotes objectives that address the important actions required to implement strategies and achieve long-term goals.

Zehra (2021) demonstrated that metrics of top management and board leadership for strategy implementation have significant, positive associations. Top management teams make strategic decisions, and the outcomes of those decisions affect organizational performance. Top level managers in higher education promotes employee empowerment and higher levels of job satisfaction through its leadership and commitment towards quality education by creating an organizational climate that values total quality and students satisfaction. Top management commitment creates a sense of enlightenment to managers who lead distinct zones within an organization. Moturi (2019) discovered that firms with high top management commitment produce high-quality products despite variations in individual constructs, whereas firms with low top management commitment have four

other constructs, namely customer focus, supplier quality management, empowerment, and internal quality information usage, as primary predictors of product quality. Mutunga (2024) suggested that there is a link between top management commitment, customer focus, continuous improvement, and change implementation.

Factors Affecting the Implementation of Strategy in HEIs

Most firms may have completed outstanding environmental scanning and collected useful data, which can result in an accurate report for developing effective strategies. These aggressive efforts are meaningless without a good strategy implementation. To date, the vast majority of organizations, including higher education institutions, have experienced strategy implementation problems and failures. The reasons and causes for these failures are numerous and have not been fully determined. First, Salmanpour et al. (2021) claimed that one of the causes of strategy implementation failure is a lack of a clear and agreed definition of strategy implementation. Mubaga & Lesa (2024) & Friesl, et.al (2021) pinpointed the factors that affect the implementation of strategy, including a hierarchical management style; a lack of experience and skills; an inability of top management to manage change and overcome resistance; a lack of top managers' involvement in the process of formulating the strategy; and a lack of leaders who can effectively motivate staff to carry out the strategic plan. Ocak, et.al, (2022) identified factors that hamper strategy implementation such as a hierarchical management style, unclear strategy and contradictory priorities, poor leadership, poor vertical and horizontal communication, organizational frontiers. Similar to this, Duba & kamaara (2025) identified six major obstacles that hamper the implementation of a strategy, including the inability to overcome internal resistance to change, poor structure, inadequate information sharing between the entities, unclear strategy, the inability to prioritize tasks, the lack of stakeholder orientation, and incorrect allocation of resources. Furthermore, Naji, (2019), suggested the following factors influencing strategy implementation process which is presented below in figure one.

Figure 1. Factors Influencing Strategy Implementation Process (Adopted from Naji, 2019).
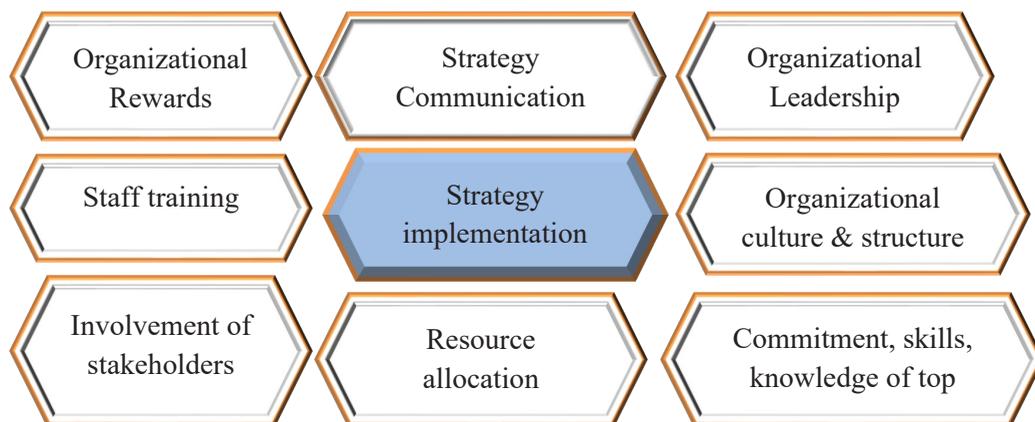
Methodology

In educational research, Paradigm is used to describe a researcher's 'worldview', perspective, school of thought, or set of shared beliefs that helps the researcher to make the appropriate choices about research question(s), the type of tools to be used, the steps involved in the collection of the data, the procedure used for data analysis & the interpretation of research data (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). Therefore, this study considered the positivist paradigm which systematizes the knowledge generation process through quantification and statistical reliance and generalization, which uses consistently rational and logical approaches to research (Omodan, 2024). Thus, the assumption of a positivist paradigm in this study is that the strategy implementation practices in comprehensive universities has many role players (humans /employees) so that their involvement to develop major strategies, make strategic decisions and choices can be examined and interpreted or rebuilt by human experiences about strategy implementation process between the researcher and the participants (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020& Creswell, 2014).

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative research method which involves collecting data and drawing conclusions from the larger sample population. It uses organized data-gathering methods and statistical analysis to analyze results by identifying patterns, testing hypotheses, and generating predictions (Omodan, 2024; Creswell, 2003). This method was chosen because it allows researchers to collect data on a large sample's opinions, behaviors, views, understanding, and perspectives by asking participants standardized questions (Creswell, 2003; Stantcheva, 2023). This implies that by utilizing standardized questions, researchers can effectively compare responses across a diverse group, ensuring that the findings are reliable and applicable to the broader population. This approach enhances the validity of the study's conclusions by minimizing biases and allowing for systematic analysis of trends.

Data Sources, Population and Sampling Techniques

This study was conducted in eight comprehensive universities in Ethiopia, including Wachemo, Werabie, Selale, Odabultum, Madawolabu, Metu, Gambella, and Bule Hora, which are established as third- and fourth-generation (newly established) universities. The study's data sources included all level managers, senior academic and support staff, which serve full-time work in the above universities. The inclusion criteria were based on the assumption that they have sufficient knowledge and information about strategic management implementation because they have developed and implemented it, as well as being key players in the implementation process at their target universities. The exclusion criteria were based on the researcher's assumption that the findings could be generalized to the target group using the sample population.

The study population was selected through a simple random sampling technique, specifically targeting 328 senior participants to collect data. A simple random sample method was used to ensure that each member of the university faculty had an equal chance of being selected. Furthermore, the simple random sampling process has good internal and external validity and a lower danger of bias (Creswell, 2003). Consequently, to determine the sample size Tamaro Yamane (1967) sample size determination formula (the confidence interval approach) (n), given the population size (N), and a margin of error (e=0.05) mean with 95% confidence levels) which is computed as: $n = N / (1+N (e)^2$ was used to calculate the sample size from each target population. to determine the sample size. which comprises the following calculation:

$n=N/ (1+N (e)^2)$
$n = 574/ 1+574× (0.05)^2$
$n = 574/ 1.75$
$n= 328$

The calculation determined three hundred twenty-eight participants to be a suitable sample size.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis Techniques

The main tool used for data gathering was a closed-ended structured questionnaire developed by the researchers. This specific data tool was selected based on its remarkable effectiveness in obtaining large amounts of data at a small expense and enabling the maintenance of both consistency and privacy from the data source (Creswell, 2003). To test participants' level of agreement with each topic, the questionnaire was designed using a five-point Likert scale. A five-point Likert scale was employed to assess the extent to which the factors were practiced to improve the quality of the obtained data. Moreover, policy documents such as Education sector development program, the education and training policy, and the education development roadmap were analyzed systematically.

The information gathered was assessed using descriptive (percentage, mean, and standard deviations and inferential statistical techniques (regression analysis) by employing SPSS version 27 software to identify factors affecting the strategy implementation practices of comprehensive universities in Ethiopia. SPSS software was the choice made due to its capacity to support analysis and interpretation in a streamlined and uncomplicated manner (Pallant, 2020). The five Likert levels such as strongly disagree (below 1.5), disagree (1.51-2.5), moderate (2.51-3.5), agree (3.51-4.5), and strongly agree (above 4.51). Multiple regressions were considered appropriate because it provided an opportunity to test the strength of the relationship between variables. Multiple regressions were conducted at 95% confidence level. The general multiple regression method adopted was in the form:

$$Y= \beta o+\beta 1X_1 +\beta 2X_2 +\beta 3X_3+ \beta 1X_4+ \beta 1X_5+ \beta 1X_6+ \beta 1X_7+ \beta 1X_8+ \beta 1X_9+ \beta 1X_{10} +\epsilon$$

Where: Y- represents strategy implementation in comprehensive universities, $\beta 0=$ Y intercept, $\beta 1$ to $\beta 4$ represents regression coefficients, X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, X_5, X_6, X_7, X_8, X_9 and X_{10} represents independent variables (strategic leadership, top management commitment and support, resource allocation, effective communication, stakeholders involvement, reward system, employee training, organizational structure and culture skills, knowledge & experience, and strategic consensus) while ϵ denotes other factors not included in the model. The analyzed data was presented in form of tables and graphs.

Validity and Reliability Test

Reliability and validity were used to confirm the accuracy of the data collected and the credibility of the investigation's findings. Before the distribution of the main questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted at a single public comprehensive university to assess the questionnaire's validity and reliability and determine the consistency of each variable. Cronbach's alpha was employed to assess the internal consistency of the administered questionnaire. According to George and Mallery (2003), Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient is normally between 0 and 1; the greater the internal consistency of the scale items, the closer Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.0. Cronbach's alpha coefficients greater than 7.0 are considered acceptable. The data obtained from the pilot study were tested, and the results of each variable are stated as follows.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient Result.

S/N	Strategy Implementation Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Strategic leadership	0.889
2	Top management commitment & support	0.886
3	Resource allocation	0.883
4	Effective communication	0.791
5	Involvement of stakeholders	0.829
6	Reward system	0.784
7	Effective employee training	0.862
8	Organizational structure & Culture	0.787
9	Skills, knowledge & Experience	0.883
10	Strategy consensus	0.768

Triangulation and Ethical Consideration

Triangulating data using various triangulation methods improves the research's credibility and validity, as well as its breadth and depth (Bans & Tiimub, 2021). To this end, data source triangulation was used throughout the sample approach to provide a more thorough picture of the problem under investigation. Using various data sources minimizes study biases in sampling and procedural bias, as well as researcher prejudice, enhancing validity and credibility, which boosts researcher confidence (Noble & Heale, 2019).

The study was examined and authorized by Addis Ababa University's College of Education and Language Studies Ethical Committee (AAURC) in accordance with the university research guidelines and regulations before to its commencement. First, the researchers underline the social concern (the norms and values) of Public comprehensive universities during data collection. Participants were informed about the study's goal and their desire to participate was validated via a permission form, as is typically advised in the literature (Hasan et al., 2021). To eliminate the researcher's bias in expressing the insights gained during the analysis and to boost the research's credibility, pilot test was conducted with similar participants to achieve maximum data validation.

Findings

The main purpose of the study was to assess the factors that affect the strategy implementation in public comprehensive universities. To attain the objective of the research, 328 questionnaires were distributed with hand delivery: 98 to managers/leaders, and 230 to employees/ staffs. A total of 96 questionnaires from managers/ leaders, and 221 from employees/ staffs or 317 (96.6%) were collected/returned as the inquiry tool to achieve the study's goal. The remaining 11 (3.4%) questionnaires from all level managers & employees were not responded to. This response rate aligns with Wilson et al.'s (2024) view that a response rate greater than 70% is considered very good/acceptable for further investigation and reporting. This indicates that the majority of participants engaged with the survey, providing a solid foundation for the research findings. A response rate of 96.6% from the distributed questionnaires also suggests strong interest and relevance of the study among the targeted management levels.

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The data was gathered from all level managers (top, middle, & line managers), teaching, and support staff members using closed-ended questionnaires. Based on the management perspective, the respondents were categorized on two groups namely Managers/leaders and employees/staff members. From an organizational perspective, both are employees/staff; however, from a managerial viewpoint, they have diverse roles, responsibilities, and communication styles, which can have a substantial impact on strategy implementation. Managers are usually in charge of making strategic decisions, overseeing teams, and assigning enough resources for strategy execution, whilst employees (non-managerial personnel) focus on executing strategies and tasks and are required to adhere to the parameters established by managers to achieve organizational goal (Gfrerer,et. al.2021). By triangulating organizational and managerial standpoints, the researcher can enhance the study's credibility and validity as well as improve the breadth and depth of the study. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, as it incorporates multiple perspectives. Consequently, the findings are likely to be more robust and applicable in real-world contexts (Noble & Heale, 2019). Likewise, the various attributes of respondents which include gender, position in their respective universities, work experience and educational background were also analysed to ensure that the sample was representative enough to the study population. In relation to gender among 317 participants, 219 are males and 98 are females.

The majority of respondents were males, which also shows that males dominated different positions in comprehensive universities. This suggests that the significant imbalance in gender representation among different roles warrants further investigation. Understanding the factors contributing to this disparity could provide insights into broader issues related to gender equity in higher education. Similarly, the respondents were asked their position in their universities. The results from respondents indicated that 96(30.3%) of the participants were managers/leaders, while 221(69.7%) were employees/staff members. Also, the respondents were asked their work experience in their universities. The response from the participants shows that 194(61%) of the participants had worked at their universities for more than 10 years, 63(20%) of the participants have 8-9 years' work experience, while the remaining 60(19%) have 6-7 years' work experience in their respective universities. The majority of the respondents have 8-9 years of work experience, which implies that most of the respondents are familiar with strategy implementation, enabling them to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the strategy implementation. This familiarity with strategy implementation suggests that the respondents are likely to provide valuable insights based on their extensive experience. Their perspectives can enhance the understanding of how well strategies are executed within the sector.

Additionally, the respondents' were requested to respond their educational backgrounds. The results from respondents, presents that 14% were undergraduates, 70% had master's degrees, and 16% had PhDs. This shows that the majority of the participants were master's degree followed by PhD holders. This suggests that the respondents possess advanced knowledge and skills, likely contributing to their ability to effectively implement strategies within their organizations. The high level of education among participants may also reflect a more informed perspective on strategic challenges and solutions.

Table 4.1. An Aggregate Response of the Factors That Affect the Strategy Implementation.

Issues/Items	Respondents rating/Agreement(%)																
	Managers/Leaders								Employees/Staff								
In your opinion, do the following factors affects strategy implementation in your university?	No	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	No	M	SD.	1	2	3	4	5
Strategic leadership	96	4.29	.698	2	4	3	13	78	221	4.39	.598	1	1	3	17	78
Top management commitment & support	96	4.15	.689	1	3	3	19	74	221	4.35	.671	1	2	3	19.9	74.1
Resource allocation	96	4.19	.715	1.5	2	4.5	22	70	221	4.29	.707	3	3	4.5	18.5	71
Communication	96	4.17	.697	3	3	2.6	22	69.4	221	4.27	.687	1	3	2.6	25	68.4
Involvement of stakeholders	96	4.18	.648	1	2.4	3.1	25	68.5	221	4.17	.648	1	2	3.1	26.4	67.5
Reward system	96	4.17	.679	1	3.1	1.9	2.9	65	221	4.19	.669	2	2	1.9	30.2	64.9
Employee training	96	4.16	.701	2	2	3	28	65	221	4.18	.699	1	3	2	30	64
Organizational structure & culture	96	4.02	.974	2	2.4	3.5	27	65	221	4.12	.874	1.9	2.5	3.9	25.1	63.6
Skills, knowledge & Experience	96	4.01	.654	1	3	5	28	63	221	4.1	.644	2	2	5.4	29.4	61.2
Strategy Consensus	96	4.01	.581	2	3.4	4.6	41	49	221	4.09	.571	1	1	12	40	46

Source: Own Field survey Data (2025)

Strategic Leadership

According to Table 4.1, 78% of both managers and employees strongly agree that strategic leadership has an impact on the strategy implementation, as evidenced by the construct's mean score (μ=4.34) and a standard deviation of 0.698. With nearly a third of managers (13%) and employees (17%) recognizing the positive effects of strategic leadership, it is clear that effective leadership plays a crucial role in driving strategic initiatives forward. However, the data also reveals that 3% of both managers and employees reported that strategic leadership has a moderate impact on strategy implementation, suggesting room for improvement in leadership strategies. The remaining 4% of managers and 1% of employees, as well as 2% of managers and 1% of employees, respectively, disagree and strongly disagree that strategic leadership has an influence for successful strategy implementation. This result strongly aligns with Naji, (2019) which suggest that the influence of strategic leadership on strategy implementation cannot be underestimated, as evidenced by the significant agreement among both managers and employees on its importance. Ultimately, fostering an environment where adaptive and proactive leaders thrive may enhance organizational alignment and drive performance outcomes, reinforcing the pivotal role that leadership plays in navigating complex strategic landscapes.

Top Management Commitment and Support

Table 4.1 presents that 74% of both managers and employees strongly agree that commitment and support of top management influence the strategy implementation, with the construct mean score of μ=4.25 and a standard deviation of 0.689. Additionally, 19% of the managers and 19.9% of the employees agree that the commitment and support of top management have an influence on successful strategy implementation. Notwithstanding, 3% of both managers and employees reported that the commitment and support of top management have a moderate impact on strategy implementation. The remaining 3% of managers and 2% of employees, as well as 1% of both managers and employees, respectively, disagree and strongly disagree that commitment and support of top management has an impact on strategy implementation. This evidence directly aligns with Zehra, (2021) which clearly underscores the pivotal role that top management commitment plays in the successful implementation of strategy within organizations. These findings suggest that fostering a culture of commitment and support at the highest levels is not only essential but also critically under recognized. Addressing this gap could significantly enhance strategy implementation efforts, leading to more cohesive and effective organizational performance.

Resource Allocation

Also, Table 4.1 shows that 69.4% of the managers and 68.4% of the employees strongly agree that resource allocation has an impact on the strategy implementation, with the construct's mean score (μ=4.24) and a standard deviation of 0.692. Furthermore, 22% of the managers and 25% of the employees agree that resource allocation has an impact on the strategy implementation. Notwithstanding, 2.6% of managers and 2.5% of employees reported that resource allocation has a moderate impact on strategy implementation highlight a prevalent sentiment that resource distribution is not being prioritized effectively in strategy discussions.. The remaining 3% of both managers and employees, as well as 3% of managers and 1% of employees, respectively, disagree and strongly disagree that resource allocation influences the strategy implementation. The study findings show that significant majority of managers and employees acknowledging its crucial influence. As organizations navigate increasingly complex environments, fostering a shared understanding of how resource allocation impacts strategy implementation will be essential for driving success and achieving organizational goals. In this context, Mailu, et al., (2018) confirms that organizational success requires technological, physical, human, and financial resources.

Effective Communication on Strategy

Table 4.1 presents that 70% of the managers and 71% of the employees strongly agree that effective communication of strategy has an impact on the strategy implementation, as evidenced by the construct's mean score (μ=4.22) and a standard deviation of 0.711. Also, 22% of the managers and 18.5% of the employees agree that effective communication of strategy has an impact on the strategy implementation. Notwithstanding, 4.5% of both managers and employees reported that effective communication of strategy has a moderate impact suggesting that while communication is valuable, other factors may also influence implementation outcomes. This implies that effective communication of strategy plays a crucial role in successfully executing organizational objectives, highlighting its importance in the workplace. However, it is noteworthy that only a minimal percentage of managers (2%) and employees (3%) outright disagree with the notion that strategy communication matters indicating a general consensus on its relevance. This evidence strongly aligns with Naji's (2019), suggesting it underscores the imperative for leaders to prioritize transparent dialogue to bridge gaps between strategy formulation and execution, ultimately driving success in their initiatives.

Involvement of Stakeholders

        Table 4.1 shows that 63.5% of the managers and 67.5% of the employees strongly agree that involvement of stakeholders has an impact on the strategy implementation, as evidenced by the construct's mean score (μ=4.18) and a standard deviation of 0.648. Also, 25% of the managers and 26.4% of the employees agree that the involvement of stakeholders has an impact on the strategy implementation. Nevertheless, 3.1% of both managers and employees reported that involvement of stakeholders has a moderate impact on strategy implementation. The remaining 2.4% managers and 1% of employees as well as 1% of both managers and employees, disagree and strongly disagree that the involvement of stakeholders has an impact on strategy implementation. The data reveals a significant majority of managers and employees recognizing its positive impact, there is a clear acknowledgment of the value that stakeholder engagement brings more cohesive strategy implementation efforts, aligning managerial and employee perspectives for greater organizational success. The findings of Joseph Otieno's (2023) study illuminate the undeniable impact of stakeholder involvement on both strategy formulation and implementation. By establishing a strong positive correlation between stakeholder engagement and organizational performance, it becomes evident that actively involving stakeholders not only fosters a sense of ownership but also enhances the overall performance index within organizations. Ultimately, the integration of stakeholder insights into organizational strategies is not just beneficial but essential for achieving sustainable success in today's dynamic business environment.

Reward System

        Table 4.1 presents that 65% of the managers and 63.9% of the employees strongly agree that an appropriate system of incentive has an impact on the strategy implementation, with the construct's mean score (μ=4.17) and a standard deviation of 0.687. Also, 29% of the managers and 30.2% of the employees agree that an appropriate system of incentives has an impact on the strategy implementation. Notwithstanding, 1.9% of both managers and employees reported that an appropriate system of incentives has a moderate impact on strategy implementation. The remaining 3.1% of managers & 2% of employees, as well as 1% of managers and 2% of employees, respectively, disagree and strongly disagree that an appropriate system of incentive has an impact on strategy implementation. The study result shows that a significant majority of managers and employees recognize the positive effects that these incentives have, suggesting a strong alignment between motivation and strategic goals which clearly illustrates that employee incentives play a crucial role in the effective implementation of organizational strategy. This overwhelming support aligns with Naji, (2019) indicating that when structured thoughtfully, employee incentive programs can enhance engagement and drive successful strategy execution, ultimately resulting in improved performance across the institution.

Effective Employee Training System on Strategy

        As indicated in Table 4.1, 65% of the managers and 64% of the employees strongly agree that an effective employee training system on strategy has an impact on the strategy implementation, as evidenced by the construct's mean score (μ=4.16) and a standard deviation of 0.700. Also, 28% of the managers and 30% of the employees agree that the effective employee training system on strategy impacts the strategy implementation. Nonetheless, 3% of managers and 2% of employees reported that an effective employee training system on strategy has a moderate impact on strategy implementation. The remaining 2% of managers and 3% of employees as well as 2% of managers and 1% of employees, respectively, disagree and strongly disagree that an effective employee

training system on strategy has an impact on strategy implementation. The study findings show a significant majority of employees strongly acknowledge the positive influence of an effective employee training system, underscoring its importance in aligning workforce capabilities with strategic goals and facilitating strategy implementation within organizations. This data supports Naji's (2019) view that investing in comprehensive training programs is valuable, as they not only enhance individual performance but also contribute to the overall success of strategic initiatives in achieving their objectives in an increasingly competitive landscape.

Organizational Structure and Culture

Table 4.1 examines that 65% of the managers and 66.6% of the employees strongly agree that organizational structure and culture have an impact on the strategy implementation, with the construct's mean score (μ=4.070) and a standard deviation of 0.9241. Also, 27.1% of the managers and 25.1% of the employees agree that organizational structure and culture have an impact on the strategy implementation. Nonetheless, 3.5% of managers and 3.9% of employees reported that organizational structure and culture have a moderate impact on strategy implementation. The remaining 2.4% of managers and 2.5% of employees, as well as 2% of managers and 2.5% of employees, respectively, disagree and strongly disagree that organizational structure and culture influence the strategy implementation. The interplay between organizational structure and culture plays a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of strategy implementation, as evidenced by the consensus among managers and employees regarding its significance. A study conducted by Lazarevic & Mosurovic (2023) indicated that the outcomes of strategy execution are significantly influenced by the interactions among an organization's structure (various departments) and different levels of strategy.

Skills, Knowledge, and Experience

Table 4.1 indicates that 63% of the managers and 61.2% of the employees strongly agree that fundamental skills, knowledge, and experience can influence the strategy implementation, as evidenced by the construct's mean score (μ=4.05) and a standard deviation of 0.6492. Also, 28% of the managers and 29.4% of the employees agree that fundamental skills, knowledge, and experience can influence the strategy implementation. However, 5% of managers and 5.4% of employees reported that fundamental skills, knowledge, and experience have a moderate impact on strategy implementation. The remaining 3% and 2% of employees as well as 1% of managers and 2% of employees, disagree and strongly disagree that fundamental skills, knowledge, and experience affect strategy implementation. The study highlights a significant consensus among managers and employees regarding the pivotal role of fundamental skills, knowledge, and experience in the successful implementation of strategies within organizations. As Bhakuni and Saxena (2023) point out, when deficiencies in important abilities are discovered, proactive capacity-building programs are required to bridge these gaps in order to navigate present problems and succeed in an ever-changing higher education context.

Strategy Consensus

Table 4.1 analyzes an aggregate response indicating that 49.2% of the managers and 46.1% of the employees strongly agree that lack of connection between vision, strategic objectives, and activities can affect the strategy implementation, as evidenced by the construct's mean score (μ=4.05) and a standard deviation of .575. Also, 41% of the managers and 40.1% of the employees agree that the connection between vision, strategic objectives, and activities can affect the strategy

implementation. However, 4.6% of managers and 11.8% of employees reported that alignment between vision, strategic objectives, and actions has a moderate impact on strategy implementation. Conversely, a small percentage of respondents 3.2% and 1% of employees as well as 2% managers and 1% of employees disagree and strongly disagree that a lack of connection between the vision, strategic objectives, and activities affects strategy implementation. The alignment between a company's vision, objectives, and activities is crucial for effective strategy implementation. In this regard Hristov, et.al. (2022) mentioned that internal strategy consistency with vision, strategy direction, objectives, and activities helps to anticipate future trends and challenges and think creatively to align organizational culture and structure with the strategic vision.

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the linear relationship between all of the independent variables (strategic leadership, top management commitment and support, resource allocation, effective communication, stakeholders involvement, reward system, employee training, organizational structure and culture skills, knowledge & experience, and strategic consensus and the dependent variable(Strategy implementation) to assess the predictive capacity of each independent variable on the adoption of strategy implementation in Ethiopia's public comprehensive universities. The regression analysis outcomes are elaborated below.

Table 4.2. Multicollinearity Test of Independent Variables.

Model	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
Strategy leadership	.959	9.449
Top management commitment & support	.945	9.369
Resource allocation	.931	9.278
Effective training	.986	9.234
Effective communication	.972	9.139
Organizational structure & culture	.968	8.050
Stakeholder involvement	.952	8.033
Reward system	.977	8.023
Skill, knowledge& experience	.918	8.019
Strategy consensus	.954	8.014

Table.4.2 indicates that the Collinearity among independent variables has no series difficulty. Pallant (2020 and Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) suggest that all independent variables have a tolerance value more than 0.1 and a VIF value less than ten. In this study VIF of each predicator ranges from 9.449 to 8.014. We can infer from the preceding table that the study's data exhibits high Multicollinearity which considers further investigation. As a result, it is advised to bear in mind that comprehensive universities should strength the factor that are mentioned above to promote successful strategy implementation practices.

Table 4.3. Regression Model Between Factors Affecting the Strategy Implementation.

Model	R	R. Square	Adjusted error	St. Error of the estimate
1	.138	.730	.600	.68774

Table 4.3 demonstrates a causal relationship between factors influencing the execution of strategy. The adjusted R Square is.60, indicating that factors influencing strategy execution may explain 73% of the variation in strategy implementation practices. Although there may be numerous factors that influence the implementation of strategy, account for about 73% of it. This implies that the dimensions of strategy-related concerns are insufficient to account for the remaining (27%) of the variety in SI practices. The R^2 value (73%) suggests that there is a strong relation between the independent and dependent variables, which is often desirable in predictive modeling.

Table 4.4. ANOVA Results Between Factors Affecting the Strategy Implementation.

ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.435	13	84.1	3.978	.000
	Residual	88.569	303	39.2		
	Total	93.003	316			

Table 4.4 presents the ANOVA outcomes of the multiple regression analysis for each predicator. The P- value of 0.000 which is < 0.05 shows that the predicator significantly contributes to the model in predicting the effects of the ten strategy related factors of the independent variables on dependent variable. Additionally, the ANOVA test F-ratio shows whether the regression model as a whole fits the data well. Therefore, the model is significant for this investigation, as indicated by the F-statistic of 3.978, Sig=000 which the evidence shows that there is a difference between the group means.

Table 4.5. Regression Coefficients Between Factors Affecting SI Practices.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1(Constant)	1.339	1.2235		0.897	.000
Strategy leadership	.887	0.3132	0.164	2.711	.000
Top management commitment & support	.856	0.3242	0.116	2.786	.000
Resource allocation	.834	0.2178	0.147	2.802	.002
Effective communication	.767	0.3412	0.158	1.012	.000
stakeholder involvement	.753	0.3425	0.141	1.722	.001
reward system	.697	0.3532	0.128	2.489	.000
Effective training	.663	0.2641	0.118	2.281	.000
Organizational structure & culture	.642	0.2897	0.158	1.062	.000
Skill, knowledge& experience	.622	0.2786	0.141	2.692	.000
Strategy consensus	.619	0.2132	0.178	1.735	.002

The multiple regression analysis in Table 4.5 indicates that, holding all other independent variables constant at zero, a unit increase in the factors affecting strategy implementation will increase strategy implementation in comprehensive universities in Ethiopia by a magnitude of 0.887, 0.856, 0.856, 0.834, 0.767, 0.697, 0.663, 0.642, 0.697, 0.663, 0.642, 0.622, and 0.619. This means that each factor contributing to strategy implementation has a specific quantified impact, suggesting that as these factors increase, they positively influence the effectiveness of strategy implementation in these universities. The values represent the strength of that relationship, highlighting the importance of each factor in driving successful outcomes. At 5% level of significance and 95% level of confidence, the significance values of all the ten variables is less than the critical value of 0.05, indicating that there exist a significant positive relationship between independent variables and dependent variable. These findings support the findings of Tarus, et.al (2015), which discovered a strong positive correlation between leadership, organizational performance, and staff training and reward systems. Also, study conducted by Njue & Ongoto (2018) found out that with dynamic changes in public universities, little was done by the top leaderships to embrace the new changes so that issues such as capacity development, involvement of stakeholders, skills and knowledge on strategy development and other the critical factors that have triggered public universities to embark on strategy implementation .

Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the perceived factors influencing the strategy implementation in comprehensive universities in Ethiopia. The findings indicate an important existence of strategic leadership and top management commitment and support during strategy implementation. The more success of strategic leadership and commitment and support of top management is the more success of structure, communication, reward system, employee training,

stakeholders involvement, resource allocation and building a solid culture which connecting and aligning all these factors to enhance the success of strategy implementation. This could be in congruence with Vieira& Albino (2025) proclaiming that the aspects of organizations such as organizational structure, culture, leadership style, motivation, involvement, communication and other may have a profound effect of strategy implementation practices. Mismatch between vision and purpose has the potential to produce chaos as a result of a lack of clear future direction, current objectives or success measurements, and a real basis for unity and team solidity. Additionally, a study by Al-Thani (2024) suggested that successful stakeholder involvement fosters strategy implementation through partnerships, results in collaborative problem solving and avoidance of conflict during implementation, and ultimately results in broader support for decisions.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the most important factors influencing strategy implementation are strategic leadership, top management commitment and support, resource allocation, employee training, effective communication followed by organizational structure and culture, stakeholder involvement, skills, knowledge, and experience, Strategic consensus, and reward systems. The study acknowledged that strategic leadership and top management commitment and support have the greatest impact and influence on strategy implementation practices at comprehensive universities in Ethiopia. These factors cumulatively impede the efficient implementation of strategies inside these universities, indicating the necessity for extensive reforms. Addressing these issues is critical for aligning university operations with overarching goals and improving overall performance, as well as aiming to successfully execute strategies and fulfill missions in an ever-changing educational environment. Navigating the issues of university strategy implementation shows a multidimensional landscape rife with challenges that require prompt action.

Recommendations

Ethiopian comprehensive universities have recently undergone significant demand-based changes, driven by both internal and external influences that necessitate adaptation. However, this study reveals that the influence of strategy implementation on guiding these processes is insufficient. This indicates that while universities are attempting to adapt to new challenges, the strategies they are employing to guide these changes are not effectively contributing to their success. This presents a crucial opportunity for comprehensive universities managers to take charge and shape the future direction of their institutions. To effectively navigate these changes, it is recommended that, comprehensive universities must properly implement strategies in areas where they have a significant competitive advantage. To effectively implement strategies, leaders should focus on improving strategic leadership and top management commitment, resource allocation, reward systems, staff development, organizational structure and culture, and the development of a strong organizational framework.

Contribution of the Study

The study on the perceived factors influencing strategy implementation in comprehensive universities in Ethiopia can contribute to the special issue focusing on strategy implementation by providing valuable insights, best practices, and recommendations for higher education performance. Therefore, scholars and policymakers should collaborate to create a comprehensive framework for effective strategy implementation practices in comprehensive universities. This collaboration aims

to establish a structured approach that enhances the effectiveness of strategy implementation in higher education settings.

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Tomorrow's Female Leaders Making Sense of Their Gender Roles Through Active Literacies

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ABSTRACT

This case study sheds light on the reading and writing practices of Gen Z girls and how their literacy plays a role in their understanding of gender identify formation, leadership development, and their social awareness. The Listening Guide was combined as a method of analysis with youth participatory action research in the form of autoethnography. Participants were positioned as "adolescent scholars" who actively shared their personal literacy artifacts as evidence of ways that they emphasize their relationships with friends, as well as non-binary, expansive views on gender, and for more attention to be paid to mental health concerns in their schools and in their generation. Critical literacy played a role in its ties to leadership development, and the ways in which active literacy projects can play a role in youth's understanding of gender and other aspects of identity. Implications include ways for schools to integrate students' voices, agentive leadership, and active literacies in educational planning and research.

KEYWORDS: adolescent literacy, participatory methods, autoethnography, adolescence and gender, adolescent mental health

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the reading and writing practices of Gen Z (individuals born between 1995 and 2010) and how these literacy practices shape their understanding of gender and themselves as future leaders (Haidt, 2024). The goal is to provide new educational perspectives to both teachers and school leaders, while considering methodological implications for qualitative researchers, especially regarding the role of students' voices in leadership studies. Scholars have cautioned the use of student voice for "what it means to recognize, accept, and work with youth as *leaders* and not just voices" (Rodela, 2022, p. 35). Rare studies have shared insights on how school principals invite student voice to enact equitable leadership practice (Flores & Ahn, 2024) and this study's methodological design provides school leaders with a pathway for exploring student democratic agency and critical consciousness through pursuing and welcoming student voice and active participation in research.

Designed as youth participatory action research in the form of autoethnography, the study included four participants, ranging in age from 14 to 18. Although the use of this methodology does not lead to absolute truths or vast generalizations, the intention was to glean understandings that may be "worthy of others' attention" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 23). While the stories of a few adolescents cannot reflect the diversity of the world, documenting and illuminating "the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place" allows others to benefit from it. As noted by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997), "The scientist and the artist are both claiming that in the particular resides the general" (p. 14).

Research Questions

The research centered around the following questions:

How do adolescent girls' literacy practices play a role in their visions of what it means to become a female leader today?

How have these ideas changed over the last 20 years with the influx of technology, social media, and deeper understandings of gender identity?

How will these new insights shed light on teaching implications for today's teachers and educational leaders?

Theoretical Grounding

The theoretical grounding is organized around the concept of literacy, including critical literacy and its ties to leadership development, the role of digital literacies, and the ways in which literacy can play a role in the understandings of gender and other aspects of identity such as what it means to be a female leader today. This analysis was conducted through the lens of educational reform, with the intention of providing insights to teachers and educational leaders.

Literacy Versus Literacies

Throughout the world, there are many narrow and conflicting conceptions of literacy. Many educational practices and reforms stem from the prevailing belief that literacy is simply a skill to be acquired (Yagelski, 2000). However, rather than conceptualizing literacy as a simple set of skills or an autonomous historical process, it is more accurate and inclusive to study literacies, including the dynamic social formations shaped by and shaping power structures (Collins, 1995). Collins (1993) identified mainstream or official literacies, which derived from historical conflicts among ethnic, religious, and political struggles. These literacies demonstrate the control literacy has been bestowed in some cultures and its exclusionary, marginalizing effects. Literacy is deeply entwined with domains of power, such as educational systems and their chosen texts, as well as the distinctions between popular and elite literature (Collins & Blot, 2003).

Research illustrates the need for studying specific cases of how literacies function in people's lives, especially with respect to the formation of social class and gender identity. By examining the role of literacy in shaping gender identity, one may challenge dominant assumptions about literacy, pedagogy, gender, and social class. A commonly received, mainstream definition of literacy as a set of basic skills considerably undermines our understandings of the complex roles that literacies play in our daily lives (Collins & Blot, 2003). Reading and writing are multifaceted activities, and one cannot separate readers and writers from their surrounding contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Literacy is connected to human relations and emotions, with our uses of literacy constituting aspects of our individual worlds. There is a need to link literacy to deeper understandings of social practices and how people make sense of their lives through their everyday activities. More importantly, there is a need for research that draws attention to literacies that are frequently hidden, especially when the practices and texts are devalued and overlooked in the eyes of dominant culture.

Digital Literacies

In today's digital world, traditional forms of literacy, such as books and writing with pencil and paper, have been replaced with texting, social media, and various online modalities. Educators and researchers must devote more attention to how this technologically savvy generation—Gen Z— uses today's literacies in powerful and sophisticated ways to reflect on their lives. Research indicates that educators need to be increasingly prepared to support students in using new media and provide

safe environments within which students can experiment and grow, while also learning beside them (Klein, 2023). Social psychologist Twenge (2023) illustrated how generations differ not simply due to events like wars but also from technologies. Researchers like Haidt (2024) have extended on this work by studying the specific effects of smartphones on Gen Z, citing four foundational harms: (1) sleep deprivation; (2) social deprivation; (3) attention fragmentation; and (4) addiction. Haidt (2024) also addressed Gen Z girls, presenting empirical evidence that shows their mental health is more adversely affected than boys.

It is imperative that teachers utilize empowering pedagogy so that adolescents are armed with critical literacy skills to combat the challenges associated with digital literacies. Positive examples of adolescents engaged in digital literacies can be found in studies like the digital literacy collaborative described by Price-Dennis et al. (2017). They used hybrid digital forms—such as blogs, multimodal texts, Web 2.0 platforms, and digital media production with adolescent learners—to address social justice issues that were important to them and that were relevant to their daily lives. Incorporating digital tools gave students a real-world platform to disseminate their concerns and explore their inquiries. Adolescent girls were able to create multimodal projects with apps and platforms like Glogster, Prezi, meme generators, Padlet, GarageBand, and Flipboard, allowing them to document their process, interact with a global audience, and share findings from their learning experiences.

Critical Literacies and Leadership

Critical literacy usually includes elements like disrupting conventional norms, questioning multiple perspectives, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and acting on and promoting social justice (Lewison et al., 2002). To engage in critical literacy, students must go beyond consuming texts and actively create them. For this reason, the current research refers to the active creation process as "active literacies". Guzzetti and Gamboa (2005) emphasized the value of encouraging adolescent girls "to be resistant readers and writers and to critically analyze texts for issues of social justice" (p. 433). These types of approaches to literacy education connect students' lives, cultural knowledge, and expectations with their reading and writing, fostering both critical analysis and creativity (Williams, 2006).

Campano et al. (2013) reconceptualized critical literacy as critical literacies to denote the "critical orientations and dispositions already seeded in the soil of [students'] local context" (p. 102). They illustrate how students connect knowledge from their worlds with the classroom, positioning them as "emerging organic intellectuals, who employ reading to cultivate critical ideas about the world and imagine a better future" (p. 119). Some researchers purposely engage and position students who are participants in projects as fellow research partners as well, sometimes referred to as "adolescent scholars" (Golden & Womack, 2016).

It is empowering for girls to critically reflect on their literacies in a consistent manner, reexamining modern views of gender. Deconstructing all sorts of ideals, including gender, in classrooms and other safe spaces, offers adolescents a constructive way to reconstitute gender subjectivity (Martino, 1995). Martino (1995) noted how "alternative textual and reading practices, informed by the interpretive analytics of Foucault and Derridian deconstruction, provide a means for elaborating alternative subject positions for… girls which may lead to the valorization of less oppressive identity formations that are not locked into a binary logocentric structure for fixing meaning" (p. 209). By using texts in trusting communities, students gain access to various reading positions, fostering criticism of dominant versions of gender, and allowing the elaboration of alternative subjectivities. Educators create spaces for discussing the impact and effects of

hegemonic gender in institutional settings like schools. People can actively use texts of all sorts to develop capacities for interrogating and reshaping gender subjectivities. When students are engaged in critical literacy, it can create opportunities for active literacies that inherently foster student leadership. Examples include media analysis, challenging assumptions, and advocating for positive change in one's society and community. Critical literacy practices encourage students to analyze texts and information with a critical lens, preparing them to lead with awareness and empathy (Core Collaborative Learning Lab, 2024).

Students can take on active roles and embody active literacies in the following ways. Key activities include analyzing power dynamics to deconstruct how power is distributed and maintained. Leaders need this ability to understand and address systemic inequities. Another action is to challenge the status quo. This proactive mindset is a vital feature of innovative and ethical leadership. A third, essential action is to promote empathy and diverse perspectives, and critical literacy promotes the consideration of various viewpoints, particularly those from marginalized communities. Leaders who are able to empathize deeply tend to make more equitable decisions. A fourth suggested action in critical literacy is to encourage agency and action. The term active literacies is used throughout this study because the ultimate goal of critical literacy is to empower individuals to take informed action to improve their world. Students who realize that they have a voice and can use it to advocate for positive social change, are recognized as true leaders. A final action in critical literacy is developing informed decision-making. It is crucial for today's adolescents to be able to discern credible information from misinformation. Critical literacy equips future leaders with the skills to make well-reasoned decisions based on thorough analysis. When viewing critical literacy and leadership together, one may see how critical literacy cultivates engaged, ethical, and socially conscious leaders who are capable of not only understanding complex issues, but who are also prepared to act upon them in a meaningful fashion (Mtsatse, 2024).

Gender and Identity as a Female Leader

Finally, in examining the connection between literacy practices and gender identity, it is imperative to explore society's growing understanding of gender, as well as what it means to be a female leader today. Recent studies provide opportunities to create novel links between literacies and gender using more inclusive terminology and more gender-expansive perspectives that extend beyond the typical gender binary framework (Walmsley, 2021). The term "gender-expansive" is used throughout this research as a way of classifying and understanding individuals who do not identify with traditional gender roles, and who do not feel confined to one gender narrative or experience (Human Rights Campaign, 2025).

Participants in the current study consistently described gendered subjectivities—their experiences of the self as a gendered being who navigates various, evolving roles rather than fixed, unchanging identities (Walkerdine, 1997). Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, finding meaning in relation to another (Connell, 1995). The current work, rather than defining girls as objects, focuses on the literacy practices and relationships through which the participants conduct their gendered lives and roles as future leaders. While it is difficult to provide a single definition of female leader, decades of research demonstrate that women leaders help increase productivity, enhance collaboration, inspire organizational dedication, and improve fairness (Novotney, 2024). Recent research indicates that female leaders exhibit more transformational leadership styles, emphasizing goodness and an organization's mission. To encourage future female leaders, studies indicate that earlier identification of leadership potential, as well as training for men and others already in power to serve as allies, and formal mentoring and sponsorship programs for females, are all beneficial steps (Novotney, 2024).

Studying gender requires analyzing its historical, structural, and performative dimensions. One avenue through which to explore such concepts is through literacy, as certain texts respond to and articulate gendered subjectivities (Collins, 1995). "Literary texts as well as pedagogical texts and pedagogical practices signify, and so symbolically establish, relations to the body, to social grouping, and to ideas of the self" (Collins, 1995, p. 85). Many researchers of adolescent literacy illustrate how young people "try on" multiple and often conflicting roles or identities as they find their place in the world through their reading and discussion of literature (Neilsen, 1998). Identities are represented and constructed through the literacy practices in which participants engage (Sutherland, 2005). For all these reasons, it is imperative that future female leaders have opportunities to actively share their experiences and meaningfully participate in research.

Methodology

The Listening Guide (LG) was used as a method of analysis in this study. The LG is a qualitative analysis method most suited for research that explores voice, silence, and relationships (Gilligan, 2015). The LG provides a framework for analyzing interview transcripts with three successive "listenings," each addressing specific questions that guide the researcher in assembling a trail of evidence. This evidence then serves as the basis for composing an analysis or interpretation (Gilligan, 2015). The LG was purposefully combined as a method of analysis with youth participatory action research in the form of autoethnography. Few researchers (Dawani & Loots, 2021) have used this combination. Combining the LG with participatory methods could potentially fill gaps noted in recent research, which highlights how the LG might benefit from additional steps to focus on emotional and social contexts (Kiegelmann, 2021; Yeo et al., 2023). In mixing participatory action research and autoethnography, this study provided participants with plenty of opportunities to share literacy artifacts that they had written, created, or read—offering a rich, interactive, and affective context for analysis, as well as a sincere pathway for engaged, agentive participation in the research.

Design

Autoethnography is a methodological approach to examining the self and its relationship to society (Camangian, 2010; Dyson, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It is a reflexive process that encourages individuals to think about larger issues of self and how it relates to the positioning of self within society contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography follows typical research methodologies, which include the collection and analysis of data—such as interviews, artifacts— through a particular methodological lens. In this study, the participants engaged in autoethnographic approaches, including two interviews, sharing literacy artifacts, and the creation of written and/ or digital products to share with the researcher. The study was purposefully designed to combine youth participatory action research in the form of autoethnography. The participatory aspect was intentional because much of what we think of as youth culture is embedded in capitalist values. In a capitalist-driven society, adolescents are some the largest consumers (Esman, 1990). However, adolescents should not simply be thought of as consumers of culture, but also as producers of it. Production theorists uphold that power and privilege are awarded to some groups and not others, often as the result of capitalism and patriarchy, and that there is potential for change within the practice of production (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Cultural production is one avenue through which marginalized populations either empower themselves, or, unknowingly, perpetuate traditional subordination. This participatory research is an opportunity for youth to exercise their power and leadership.

During the informed consent process, participants were provided with interview questions ahead of time. If they elected to engage in the study, participants were asked to bring literacy artifacts with them to their first interview. Most participants participated in a second interview, at which time they were also encouraged to bring literacy artifacts to share. Sharing literacy artifacts, such as a favorite song or book, or a poem or journal entry they had authored, illuminated and concretized responses to the interview questions. In addition, the participants planned future artifacts they created as goals to attain, such as making a documentary based on the content of the study, and presenting at international conferences with the researcher, exhibiting engagement and agency in the process. Inspired by the work of Golden and Womack (2016), this study refers to the participants as adolescent scholars, to highlight the substantive role they played in the research, and to affirm their literacies. Intermingled with the natural flow of the interview questions and responses, there were particular moments when the participants actively shared artifacts and extended knowledge, at which time they are also referred to as adolescent scholars in subsequent sections. Each participant, also positioned as a scholar, entered the interview setting with ideas guided by what they had made or brought to the interview to share as a literacy artifact. During the interviews, participants brought issues and ways of discussing the content that were guided by their sharing of artifacts as adolescent scholars.

Participants

Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the four participants. They were recruited with informed consent forms, which were presented to the participants and, in the case of minors, their guardians. All components of the study were approved by an institutional review board. Most of the study took place over the course of a month during the winter for 2025 in the northeast region of the United States, while the participants were on holiday break from school. Participants were culturally diverse: Emily, the youngest, was 14; Eden and Aleida were both 17; and Megan was 18.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources included two interviews per participant, field notes from the researcher's journal, audio recordings, transcripts, and participant-generated artifacts like notebooks, favorite texts, writing samples, schoolwork, photos, and hyperlinks from their smartphones and laptops. Participants created digital spaces, wrote in multiple genres, read and discussed challenging texts, produced multimedia, and two of them offered to present at a conference with the researcher. Interview transcripts were analyzed with the LG. As its name implies, the LG is a systematic approach that guides the researcher through multiple listenings of interview transcripts. The first step is to listen for the plot of the participant's story, attending to the "I" voice in the narrative. It also attends to contrapuntal voices, which may be harmonious moments or moments of tension within the narrative. The evidence gathered through these listenings becomes the basis for preparing an analysis (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021). The LG is distinct from other means of analysis due to its emphasis on the psychological complexities of humans, specifically through attention to voice and silence. Likewise, it highlights the importance of human relationships and, with its feminist grounding, provides spaces to hear voices that have traditionally been silenced.

> *It is distinctly different from traditional methods of coding, in that one listens to, rather than categorizes or quantifies, the text of the interview ... In other words, listening for an aspect of experience that has been rendered invisible by an oppressive ideology, such as learning about girls' [ideas, thoughts] within the*

context of patriarchy, involves an interpretive process that weaves together the speaker's words and other aspects of her storytelling that the Listening Guide forefronts. (Tolman, 2001, pp. 132–33)

By utilizing the LG in this mixed methods fashion, one could argue that it yields stronger data. Recent innovators of the LG methodology, such as those by Yeo et al. (2023), propose adding a fifth listening that focuses on emotion to facilitate a more holistic analysis of voice data. Kiegelmann (2021) proposed an additional analytical step: listening for social context which studies overt and latent information on the social context of the research. One could contend that the methodological design of the study, with its more contextual and affective data, may reduce the need for listenings, or enhance and fortify the analysis. Research in which the LG has been coupled with participatory methods is rare, and the only study found, which also included adolescent girls, was Dawani and Loots's (2021) ethnographic fieldwork with Palestinian adolescents using the LG and art-based methods.

Validity

A researcher can never truly know the voices of participants in meaningful and authentic ways unless participants share their experiences and stories on their terms. Participants must engage more fully in the process through participatory methods and member checks. To ensure validity in this study, the researcher performed member checks. The researcher was also a part of an interpretive community (Tappan, 2001; Taylor et al., 1995), which consisted of a collaboration of scholars trained in the LG and sensitive to the issues involved in the study. The audience met on a regular basis to offer support and suggestions for interpretations of the data. The interpretive community would provide suggestions for segments of the interviews that required further examination and offered multiple perspectives for triangulation.

The LG also includes a built-in reader response feature, which helps to ensure validity of the research. While researchers must be careful not to tell their own stories through the voices of participants, it is equally important to acknowledge their position in the research and allow their experiences to guide a suitable path (Coddington, 1997). As a result of this thinking, the researcher selected the LG for its feminist grounding, which provided both the freedom and structure necessary to hear the voices of female participants. This approach ensured validity by allowing the researcher to locate her own experiences and reactions within the process, which were validated through member checks and engagement within the interpretive community.

Findings

This analysis is a synthesized collection of stories of four adolescent girls, each of whom described the role of literacy in their understanding of gender and their growing autonomy as future female leaders. In addition to simply answering interview questions, participants are also referred to as adolescent scholars as they shared literacy artifacts that emphasized their relationships with friends, an embrace of gender-expansive views on humankind, and calls to action for more attention to mental health concerns in their generation. While the girls stressed the uniqueness of each person's experience and the limits of generalizability, all four emphasized a mobilization of efforts for change in both schools and society at large.

Relationships and Critical Literacy

During the first listening of the LG, the main goal is to attend to the stories that participants share. The aim is to provide a succinct yet rich synopsis of the emerging trends and themes from the first listening, capturing the general scope of participants' stories (Woodcock, 2010). As a researcher listens to and reads the interviews, a gradual understanding of the informants' main storylines emerges, a process referred to as "listening for plot" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Raider-Roth, 2000). When asked about important relationships in their lives, all participants highlighted the role of peer friendships. Although some participants mentioned significant family relationships, there was unanimous emphasis on the role of friends in their lives.

The mentioning of romance was rare. Only Eden, age 17, spotlighted romance. When Eden was asked to discuss a relationship, she had seen in the media that resonated with her, she highlighted a famous pop singer and the singer's romantic partner, a well-known athlete. In Eden's words, they are "sort of like the pivotal romantic relationship." In Eden's stance as an adolescent scholar, she had her smartphone handy, with plenty of photos of the couple, as well as music from the pop icon to share.

When asked the same question, 14-year-old Emily responded with a different pop artist with more of a rock tone. Emily also exhibited agency in her role as an adolescent scholar by using a smartphone to explain how they are an independent band and how she finds their collaboration inspirational. Emily played their music, describing it as "sad, provocative, romantic, and rhythmic." Emily earnestly explained that she enjoys coming-of-age tales and traditional friendship story arcs. However, she has never enjoyed "sappy romance." "I'm not a hopeless romantic," she added.

"Critical literacy is like a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable: It is an understanding that language practices and texts are always informed by ideological beliefs and perspectives, whether conscious or otherwise" (Jones, 2006, p. 65). Via reader response, the researcher wondered if this new generation had begun to reap some rewards of teachers' efforts of critical literacy instruction.

Gender Expansive vs. Binary Roles

Perhaps one of the most unique features of the LG is the creation of 'I' poems or ''voice poems.'' This technique provides a systematic way for researchers to listen to a participant's first-person voice, allowing them to attend to distinctive patterns within it. During the second listening, this methodical attention to voice provides researchers with opportunities to hear how informants articulate their sense of self in relationship to themselves and others (Woodcock, 2010). When Emily was asked about literacies that had inspired her or been role models for her regarding gender, she replied:

> *That's actually a good question, I think, at my old school, in 8th grade, I was like kind of exploring like, who am I? And like, what am I? And then I read a lot of these really good books, and some of them were graphic novels, and some of them were just. You know, your regular chapter books, and I think it kind of made me think about like, who am I? And I'm like, am I pansexual? Am I straight, am I? I don't know. Bisexual. And it kind of got me on this journey to find who I am. And a lot of people don't even get there until they turn about 18 or 21… I just hit one of like the biggest life journeys in history at the age of 14! And I'm like, okay. I know what like, how I feel and who I am. It's kind of like those books have really inspired me. It was called Love Somebody by Rachel Roasek from 2022. I found; I found who I am.*

Directly after this exchange, Emily embodied her role as an adolescent scholar and shared a hard copy of the book with the researcher. It is a young adult novel that follows three teenagers who are all friends, with two of them ultimately falling in love with the same girl. Emily went on to explain how this novel, among other things, inspired her to engage in her own writing. She shared that over the summer, she had written a coming-of-age novel, as well as a collection of short stories centered on the winter holiday season. Given the significance of this excerpt in Emily's exploration of gender, the researcher created a voice poem by extracting all the 'I' statements:

> I think
> I was like
> who am I?
> what am I?
> I read
> I think
> who am I?
> And I'm like,
> am I pansexual?
> Am I straight, am I?
> I don't know. Bisexual.
> this journey to find who I am.
> I just hit one of like the biggest life journeys
> I'm like, okay. I know what like, how I feel and who I am.
> I found; I found who I am.

In this voice poem, we see Emily thinking, openly questioning, and engaging critically with her literacies. She articulates that she is on a journey to find who she is becoming. By engaging in critical literacy practices, she explores gender identities. By the end of the poem, it appears that Emily has come full circle. "I know who I am." She speaks in more affirmative terms. "I know what I like, how I feel, and who I am." By the last line, Emily seems to create her own unintentional, yet beautiful refrain by repeating herself, "I found, I found who I am."

Eden and Megan also found inspiration in gender affirming cultural resources. In her role as adolescent scholar, Eden used her smartphone to show the researcher videos of popular makeup artists on social media. "I love makeup tutorials. They are not specific to women. It's nonbinary. It's like all sorts of people doing it. It's really inclusive." Megan, an 18-year-old college freshman studying film, cited the #MeToo movement. As an adolescent scholar, Megan used her smartphone to show the researcher images of the social movement, which raises awareness about sexual abuse, harassment, and rape culture. As she explained its significance, she shared how she finds it empowering in her growing understanding of gender. "It inspires me to keep going as I enter the film industry."

Aleida demonstrated a more dissonant stance regarding gender. When utilizing the LG, this dissonance may be referred to as contrapuntal. Cofounders of the LG (Gilligan et al., 2006) refer to third and fourth listenings as contrapuntal. Third and fourth listenings are an avenue for exploring how themes either melodiously interact or are in tension with one another. When Aleida was asked about literacies that had inspired her or been role models for her regarding gender, she replied as an adolescent scholar, using links and images from her smartphone:

I find almost a lot of times male characters to be more relatable in a lot of media. I mean, there's recent ones where I'm like, okay, you're obviously putting a little more effort into the female characters, and I do relate to them but a lot of times it's like, they're very flat. So I find myself like not really being interested in them. Except for one like ... you know, some directors of movies ... They make a very deliberate image, like "Little Women" or "Lady Bird." You know, realistic portrayals of women. But I don't know ... it's just boring a lot of times like they don't have enough, or they want them to be too perfect. It's like black and white ... In "Game of Thrones," like, there's Daenerys, which is like she like wants to take over the kingdom or whatever. And she's pretty unapologetic about it. And like. yeah, it is kind of evil. But I think that's what makes for such an interesting character ... You're not gonna have a role model from "Game of Thrones." Let's be honest. But I think that as a character she was very interesting because they kind of let her be like just like, go for it ... I think "Game of Thrones" actually had really interesting female characters like Sansa Stark. She started off as this, like innocent little girl who's gonna marry the king. And then she goes through all of this stuff, and she does like take it hard. She doesn't know what to do. But like, I think because it's not showing oh, she's weak ... like a stereotype. It's more so just like, real? ... I guess, I like ... superheroes. Like with Marvel, like Peter Parker or Tony Stark ... They have that ambition to create new things. It's sometimes lacking in your (female) characters, which I which is why I find some more influence (in male characters). The ambition that makes sense.

Unlike Emily, Eden, and Megan's explicit mentioning of nonbinary gender, Aleida specifically called out the "black and white" portrayals of gender in media and literacies. This is not to imply that Aleida is not supportive of nonbinary gender expression—on the contrary, she is. Rather, her frustration lies with the literary artifacts she brought up as examples, which she approached with an eloquent, engaged, and critical stance. This is interpreted as a contrapuntal voice of rejection and embrace. Aleida rejected flat characters who are too perfect, innocent, weak, or traditional female stereotypes. Instead, she embraced unapologetic characters who are ambitious and real—true to themselves—even though the examples still largely conform to traditional binary gender roles.

Mental Health Concerns of Gen Z

In the early 2010s, the mental health of adolescents plunged, with rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide rising sharply, sometimes even doubling compared to previous decades (Haidt, 2024). Not surprisingly, three out of the four participants in this study mentioned some aspect of mental health during interviews or artifact sharing. Whether a part of their narrative or mentioned peripherally, mental health emerged as a part of their emotional existence today. In her role as an adolescent scholar, Aleida brought the book *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfogh as a literary artifact that had made an impact on her. She described the book as:

It's weird content. (The character) takes a bunch of drugs to try to like, stay asleep for a year, and just like the details of that book and the way that the relationships are described, like a relationship to a parent, the relationship to her best friend. Like, she (the main character) can't connect with people, basically. And for me

that was kind of confusing. I couldn't imagine. Just like having parents I didn't really know at all. But then, at the same time, this girl is like insanely rich, because her parents died when she was like 20 or something, and they just left her a bunch of money. So, she's rich, and she's lonely, and she just wants to be asleep for a year, and at the end the end ... really startled me in a way, because it was like she had just finished her year, or she was about to finish her year. And I hadn't quite picked up on the fact that it took place in 2000.

Aleida went on to discuss her shock upon realizing that the character in the book was not someone from her own generation, Gen Z, but instead from the researcher's generation, Gen X (those born between 1965 and 1981). Aleida had naturally assumed the character was Gen Z due to the generation's documented struggles with mental health. However, she was startled by the revelation that these struggles were not exclusive to her generation. Aleida had perceived Gen X as stronger and more self-reliant, yet the book helped her realize that anyone can struggle with mental health challenges and that help is available. Reflecting on the book, Aleida shared, "Her friend (the main character in the book) really struggled because she thought that she's really ugly because it was 2000. And (it had been) like the super skinny nineties. The girl who wants to sleep for you." This further demonstrated how many of our generational issues are similar, though perhaps exacerbated today. Aleida then discussed the role of smartphones and media in potentially amplifying these struggles. During one of the interviews, Emily spoke openly about peer relationships and mental health complexities at her school. The conversation also involved the impact of social media and texting.

I think one of the people I think in my life that have had a big, strong impact on me ... is this girl. I'll give them. I'll give them a pseudonym: Alex. Then this person has a lot of mental health issues. And they need help and they know it. And they're not getting the help that they need. And they've told me this because they know that they trust me. And it's bad because it's putting a bad effect on me and a bunch of my peers, and we're not comfortable with it. Now, I'm not the only one that's aware of this. I think a lot of people have now realized it and are like, oh, this isn't good. I think that she also like was drawn to me in a good way ... I think I've just talked to some other people in my grade, and they've made good impacts on me. I'm getting to know them more now, like it's I would say it's a good group of people ... more psychologically healthier.

Emily explained how she had been deeply affected by the psychological complexities at school that fall term. She recounted how peers had engaged in violence, self-harm, and suicide attempts—experiences that were understandably traumatic for everyone involved. Emily described how, many times, news of the mental health concerns spread via text messages and social media posts, amplifying the emotional intensity of the situation.

Given the significance of her reflections, a voice poem felt appropriate for deeper analysis.

I think
I think
I'll give them. I'll give them
        they need help and they know it
        they're not getting the help that they need
        they've told me this
        they trust me
                me and a bunch of my peers,
and we're not comfortable with it
Now, I'm not the only one that's aware
I think a lot of people have now realized it
I think
I think
I'm getting to know
I would say it's a good group of people … more psychologically healthier

It is a striking visual to see Emily's voice displayed in this voice poem format. At the start, Emily is contemplative, wanting to help with statements like "I think" and "I'll give them." To emphasize the friend's request for support, the poem is structured with stanzas to form a visual distinction. As the poem progresses, the involvement of more friends through texting and social media becomes clear, marking a shift in the tone. By the final stanza, stability emerges. Beginning with "Now I'm," Emily's language becomes stronger. Words like "aware," "realize," "think," "know," "good," "group," "psychologically," and "healthier" show emotional strength.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the literacy practices of Gen Z and how those literacies play a role in their understandings of gender and their roles as future leaders. With the influx of technology, social media, and deeper understandings of gender identity, their narratives emphasized the importance of their relationships with friends, gender-expansive views on humankind, and more attention to mental health concerns among their generation. The following cross case analysis provides an overview of how the adolescent scholar participants experienced gender identity formation, leadership development, and growing social awareness.

Gender Identity Formation

Aleida, Megan, and Emily actively and critically engaged with their literacies, demonstrating relatively consistent views on rejecting binary gender roles, mostly overlooking overly romantic storylines, and expressing genuine concern for mental health. Through critical literacy practices, Eden, Megan, and Emily exhibited mostly inclusive, gender-expansive views. Literacy was an agentive pathway for forming many identities, including gendered identities.

Eden was the only adolescent scholar to bring a romance artifact. There was little emphasis on romance and instead, the other three participants all emphasized familial and especially friendships when highlighting their growing ideas about gender. All four adolescent scholars used their smartphones as literacy artifacts to explore and explain their ideas about non-binary, gender expansive roles. Emily, Aleida, and Megan shared books, authored texts, and brought images to

illustrate their ideas about gender expansiveness. Aleida was the only adolescent scholar who brought several multimedia examples to discuss the black and white portrayal of gender and how she is inspired by female leaders who are "ambitious, real, and true to themselves".

Leadership Development

Emily and Megan both displayed such distinct agency in the process that they both offered to present their findings from the research at an academic conference with the researcher. When considering both a research and policy perspective in educational planning, the importance of including students' voices in education is recognized, yet a gap exists between research, policy and practice; it is necessary to develop students' leadership capacity and participation in decision making (Egan et al., 2025). One distinct pathway is by integrating several research methods to ensure the innovative expressiveness of participants while generating rich data and analysis. Engaging adolescents as scholars enacts and enhances their leadership skills.

Megan is a university film student and an experienced documentarian who has begun making a film based on this research. As a form of qualitative inquiry, documentary films provide "portals to experience, experience that enlarges comprehension" (Eisner, 2003, p. 27). The participatory process of creation has empowered Megan to gain new, enriched perspectives on her evolving role as a female leader in her chosen profession. Through storytelling—both about ourselves and the world around us—we construct and reconstruct parts of our selfhood and identity (Josselson, 2017). Identity can be considered as part of the evolving, creative self, especially as a leader.

Social Awareness

"Gen Z has several great strengths that will help them drive positive change … they want to bring about systemic change to create a more just and caring world" (Haidt, 2024, p. 12). In particular, the role of mental health concerns in both Emily's and Aledia's cases were noteworthy, emphasizing issues over smartphone usage and how texting and social media amplify mental health issues. Megan, Emily, and Aleida all utilized personal journal entries, books, and smartphones as artifacts to share their worries about the mental health landscape of their schools and their generation. Emily was clear about how texting and social media posts can spread news quickly. Aleida spoke about how the current generation is different in the ways that smartphones amplify a range of issues, including mental health. From these findings, and from recent studies of schools attempting to limit smartphone use during the school day (Pressley & Marshall, 2026), there does appear a need for students, educators, and school leaders to continue to rethink cell phone usage in an ongoing fashion.

In Emily's school, there were counseling and mental health supports in place, yet according to Emily and other adolescent scholars in the research, they felt that the school landscape and their generation in general would benefit from more infrastructure in this area. Despite the small sample size of this study, there are troubling numbers of mental health concerns of adolescents worldwide (Haidt, 2024). Since participants highlighted the need for more support surrounding mental health, a synthesis of research, especially of various case studies about what schools are doing across the globe to address the mental health crisis in schools worldwide, would be beneficial. It would also be valuable to study the longitudinal use of psychological first aid (e.g. Everly & Lating, 2022) in both teacher preparation programs and in ongoing professional development.

Conclusions

An obvious limitation of the current study is its small sampling and size. It is recommended that more researchers engage in these types of studies, both small case studies and larger scale approaches, to gather more information. In terms of generalizability, it is true that the stories of a few adolescents cannot reflect the vast diversity of our globe. Although they are not generalizable in the traditional sense, their strength lies in their connection to the real world and the participants' ability to use their voices within their social and historical environments. In these ways, participants' experiences are valued (Myers, 2000). Having many small case studies along with larger studies would yield considerable data.

When poised as adolescent scholars, participants shared literacy artifacts and created written and/or digital products, all of which were used to facilitate interviews and dialogue. The LG was then used to analyze transcripts. Engaging in such literacy practices contributed to a more complemented critical self-awareness and the construction of a broader narrative of what it means to be an adolescent, a female leader, and part of Gen Z. Each participant, also positioned as a scholar, entered the interview setting with ideas guided by what they had made or brought to the interview to share as a literacy artifact. During the interviews, participants brought issues and ways of discussing the content that may not have been anticipated or asked about in a different interview format (Rose, 2014). The LG and participatory methods are formidable approaches on their own. However, combining them created a highly productive research experience, from data production to analysis and deep interpretation. More importantly, an approach such as this provides a way of enacting student voice practices and shared leadership (Holquist et al., 2023).

Given the evidence of critical awareness among participants, educators should continue fostering critical literacy practices, particularly through social action projects. Some components of critical literacy include naming and critiquing forms of bias and systemic inequities, reading widely and critically, responding to social issues in ways that are sensitive to the complexities of problem-solving and the multiple people involved, and acting with agency (Robinson, 1998). These efforts should be documented in empirical research studies that actively engage participants in the process. Critical literacy alone, simply in the form of classroom practice, or slightly passive activities such as simply reading, are not enough. Critical literacy and its role in fostering leadership and scholarship truly leads to action when students meaningfully apply their skills to analyze, question, and reshape the world around them in hands-on projects such as participatory research with follow scholars and leaders.

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Commitment to Community Engagement in Two Ethiopian Universities: A Case Study of a Diverse Program and a Specialized University

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative comparative case study examines community engagement at two Ethiopian Universities, one with a specialized mission and the other with a diverse mission. Data were collected through individual interviews with key informants and pertinent official documents. Key findings disclose significant disparities in maturity and effectiveness of engagement initiatives. Though community engagement has been integrated into the strategic planning of both universities, the extent and specific goals are different. The study further identified institutional commitment to community engagement, and approaches and focus areas, differ. The study has found commonalities for both universities. Although there are transparency issues, dedicated centers focusing on planning, implementation, staffing, funding, and fostering community relationships have been established. Both universities have faced common challenges inherent in the Ethiopian higher education system related to resource constraints, need for stronger linkages with the community, and lack of effective mechanisms for assessing impact of engagement activities. The study concludes by discussing the implications of planning and increasing resources for dedicated community engagement units, developing more comprehensive strategies for measuring and reporting outcomes of community-focused activities, and enhancing commitment by strengthening community participation in the design and implementation of initiatives.

KEYWORDS: community engagement, higher education, institutional commitment, Ethiopian education system

Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly called upon to extend their impact beyond the traditional domains of teaching and research to engage with their surrounding communities due to historical context, institutional missions, and external expectations for knowledge and expertise (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015; Farnell, 2020; Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999). The contribution of higher education must extend to the public good and address pressing societal challenges (Farnell, 2020). This shift involves a fundamental change in university interactions as it is transforming from a one-way model to a dynamic, mutually beneficial engagement framework, fostering civic progress and aims to reaffirm the academy's commitment to community engagement (Boyer, 1996; Roper & Hirth, 2005; Ginsberg Center, n.d). A notable trend in this evolution is the recognized need to shift away from a more traditional approach centered on "community service," which often carried connotations of a unidirectional provision of assistance from the university to

the community to, a stronger and more advantageous kind of "community engagement," marked by sincere cooperation and reciprocity between university and its community partners (Desta & Belay, 2018). Community engagement is the mandate of Hawassa University, and it is defined as facilitating knowledge and technology transfer for the community, enhancing agriculture, natural resources management, education, health, nutrition, and socio-economic aspects of the university in collaborative relations with the community. Adama Science and Technology University defines community engagement as a collaborative endeavor that addresses real-world challenges of the community through demand-driven community engagement using the university's expertise in science and technology for mutual benefit and national development.

Conceptual Framework
Conceptualizing Community Engagement

In the general sense of institutional commitment to community engagement, Bringle and Hatcher (2000) noted a campus mission statement, policies, faculty roles and rewards, presidential leadership, budgetary allocations, a general understanding of and support for service learning among administrators and staff, infrastructure, publicity and integration of community service learning with other institutional work (such as admissions, student affairs, financial aid, general education, long-term planning, and institutional assessment) are examples of institutionalization. One of the prominent institutions in studying community engagement in higher education, Carnegie defines community engagement as "the collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6). The concept of community engagement as the "third mission", encompassing all social and economic activities of universities, has gained increasing prominence in the 21st century, evolving alongside the traditional missions of teaching and research as policymakers and academics have shown interest in understanding how universities could drive regional innovation (Taieb, 2024). Research and discovery (knowledge advancement), teaching and learning (knowledge transmission), and community service (application of knowledge) have been the main duties of Ethiopian higher education institutions (Rudnák et al., 2024). Therefore, institutional commitment of Ethiopian universities to community engagement must be analyzed in this national context. How each institution interprets, plans, and operationalizes this crucial aspect of its mandate must be examined, too.

Global and Regional Perspectives on Community Engagement in Higher Education

Community engagement is a vital mission for universities worldwide, influenced by organizational, political, social-cultural, and economic factors (Bernardo et al., 2012). Although scholars agree on its importance, the definition is multifaceted with various overlapping terms such as "civic engagement," "public engagement," and "community outreach" used interchangeably (Hart et al., 2011). These terminologies highlight the varied ways universities approach their role beyond the "ivory tower". Historically, universities have evolved from the elite institutions to hubs of societal needs. This transformation was catalyzed by the Morrill Act in the United States, which knotted land grants with public service, and the establishment of civic universities in the United Kingdom. Today, the mission is strengthened by global declarations such as the Talloires Declaration and many regional networks, and the European Union's educational initiatives and PASCAL International Observatory (Preece, 2017). These developments show a new global paradigm shift of universities as key players that address community concerns and drive social and economic reintegration,

as noted by UNESCO in the African context. Despite the global push, institutionalization of community engagement is fraught with constraints and challenges. Research highlights two major obstacles: a lack of substantive conceptualization and contradictory positioning within community and university structures (Johnson et al., 2020). Building noteworthy and sustainable affiliations between universities and outside stakeholders is a complex task burdened with tensions that obstruct the achievement of laid-down goals (Ogunsanya & Govender, 2019). These are not separate issues but rather systematic challenges confronting many universities when they attempt to institutionalize engagement into core missions.

The Ethiopian Context and the Research Gap

Western-style modern higher education in Ethiopia, with its roots in colonial-era institutions, started with the establishment of the first University during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, now known as Addis Ababa University (Teferra, 2016). Today, Ethiopian higher education institutions have a mandate to serve three missions: teaching-learning, research, and community service (Desta & Belay, 2018). Although the mandates exist in paper, the practical implementation of community engagement is in "early stage of development," hindered by obstacles such as finance, quality personnel, and institutional support (Van Deuren et al., 2016).

Statement of the Problem

The Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation no. 1152/2019 states higher education institutions in Ethiopia must ensure that they are the center of excellence and must promote research, teaching, and community service in priority areas (Ethiopia, 2019). As stipulated in the senate legislations of different universities in Ethiopia, serving the community is a crucial aspect of higher education, and it can promote academic merit in teaching, research, scholarship, administration, and creative activities (Rudnák et al., 2024). However, the institutionalization of community engagement (CE) in Ethiopian higher education institutions is a far cry from commitment (Desta & Belay, 2018). Although various factors can explain the state of CE in higher education institutions, the state of institutionalization of CE is believed to be one of them. Despite a growing mandate for community engagement in Ethiopian higher education institutions, research and policy gap exists. Policies, annual abstracts, and strategies of the Ministry of Education have failed to emphasize a standardized, nationwide reporting and documenting system for community engagement activities of academic institutions. This lack of formalized policy and transparent data is a key impediment to the state of actual dedication to community engagement in Ethiopian universities. The current state of institutionalization remains difficult to assess. Although mission statements are aspirational, the actual practical implementation is a key challenge. Lack of institutionalized community engagement in higher education hinders research, affects the curriculum, and marginalize certain groups. This research, therefore, seeks to address this gap by conducting an in-depth, comparative analysis of two different Ethiopian universities.

Research Questions

The research seeks to answer two questions:
1. How is the enhancement of community engagement achieved by the institutional support in these universities?
2. What challenges do staff members face in institutionalizing community engagement in these universities?

<h1 style="text-align:center">Methodology</h1>

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative multiple case study design to explore and compare institutionalization of community engagement, and the analysis focused on two universities in Ethiopia. Both universities accept community engagement as a core function. This analysis was based on qualitative in-depth interviews with a wide variety of education stakeholders, including community partners involved in community engagement in the institutions. The case study design was appropriate as the researchers wanted to answer why and how questions through in-depth exploration of a subjective phenomenon (Yin, 2014). Each case served as a unit of analysis, and the design compares the findings; evidence from this type of design is compelling (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2014).

Case Descriptions: Institutional Context

According to Ethiopian higher education official system, universities are differentiated into four types: first-generation research universities, universities of applied science, comprehensive universities, and specialized universities (Hunde et al., 2023). Hawassa University is first-generation research university encompassing 9 colleges, 3 institutes, and 7 campuses. Comparatively, Adama Science and Technology University is the leading specialized Science and Technology University in Ethiopia due to its strong reputation and pioneering role in the sector. To provide foundational understanding of each university, we conducted a systematic documentary review. Our search focused on publicly available documents from both official websites, including the universities' strategic plans, senate legislations, policies on academic staff appointment and promotion, and annual reports (see Table 3).

Hawassa University (HU)

Hawassa University's mission statement is on the website, and it asserts, "Hawassa University strives to produce efficient and internationally competent graduates and undertake innovative works, rigorous research and technology transfer activities to foster social and economic development of the country" (Hawassa University, n.d.). Strategic official documents indicate the university's "outreach programs" are diverse and focus on agricultural and natural resource management, education and training, health and nutrition, free legal services, and other socio-economic issues (Hawassa University, n.d.). These activities demonstrate a comprehensive commitment to meeting the diverse needs of the local population. For example, College of Agriculture works closely with local farmers in generating and transferring agricultural technologies for its mandate areas and beyond in the Sidama region (Hawassa University, n.d.). Document analysis showed Hawassa University gets external support for community engagement programs from organizations such as NORHED II-ReRED, CORDAID Ethiopia, and Mastercard Foundation. Document analysis implied Hawassa University's budgeting structure may include a centralized approach in which cash for community engagement is not expressly segregated but rather integrated into various departmental or project budgets.

Adama Science and Technology University (ASTU)

Conversely, ASTU's mission is to provide ethical and competent graduates in applied science and technology through quality education, demand-driven research, and community service (Adama Science and Technology University, n.d.). The university's website has a section dedicated to community engagement, which can confirm this. ASTU's institutional commitment to community

engagement is found in its strategic documents. The document analysis indicates the university ratified Five-Year Strategic Plan 2026-2030 that outlines the university's vision of becoming the first choice by 2030. These plans include objectives and achievements related to establishment of various research and technology centers, building capacity to host various international and national research workshops, participating and playing a key role in national and international projects, and increasing participation in consulting services. The formal structures for community engagement as described in the documents differ between the two universities. This is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Organizational Structures.

University	Dedicated Unit(s)	Mandate/Focus
HU	Community Service Directorate	Coordinates all community services, facilitates knowledge and technology transfer in agriculture, education, health, and socio-economic aspects, and fosters community collaborations.
ASTU	Community Engagement Directorate, Science Culture Development Center, Entrepreneurship Development Center	The Community Engagement Directorate coordinates community-focused activities. Science Culture Development Center promotes science and technology within the community. Entrepreneurship Development Center supports innovation and business development.

The primary contribution of the study is different university models face different institutionalization challenges. By comparing these two archetypes, the research shows a one-size-fits-all approach is not effective. The two universities were purposefully selected because of distinct but complementary profiles. Hawassa University, being older research university, has extensive experience and established traditions in outreach and community engagement across a range of disciplines, while ASTU is relatively new university that focuses on science, technology, and applied research, and this offers a unique perspective on how a science and technology university approaches community engagement. Comparing these universities allows the research to offer findings that are broadly applicable to both traditional and specialized universities.

Participants

The participants in this study were key informants selected based on their roles and direct involvement from various departments within the university, and outside the university, to provide a broad overview of perspectives (see Table 2). The purposive sampling strategy ensured participants with strong, informed opinions were included, such as college deans and directors. Interviewees were selected from the universities' existing colleges, representing Biglan (1973)'s classification of disciplines along three dimensions as hard/soft, applied/pure, and life/non-life of academic disciplines (Simpson, 2017). The interviewed members were representatives from faculty, administrative staff, students, community partners, officials, and individuals who were directly

involved in coordinating community engagement initiatives. This diversity of roles provides a holistic view of how engagement is implemented and supported across multiple organizational levels. The data presented in the table were obtained through demographic questions that were part of the interview protocol.

Table 2. Research Participants.

Level	Participants	No.
HU	Deans	2
HU	Deputy Deans	3
HU	Academic Staff	4
HU	Administrators	3
HU	Directors/Coordinators	6
Ministry of Education	Official	1
Agriculture Research Office, Sidama Region	Community Partner (Hawassa)	1
ASTU	Community Partner (ASTU)	1
ASTU	Deans	1
ASTU	Deputy Deans	2
ASTU	Academic Staff	6
ASTU	Administrators	2
ASTU	School Head	1
ASTU	Directors/Coordinators	3
ASTU	Student	1
Total		37

Data Generation Tools and Procedures

The data for this study were collected using systematic review of key university documents and semi-structured interviews. To analyze institutional commitment to community engagement, we conducted a systematic documentary review. Our search focused on publicly available documents from both official websites, including the universities' strategic plans, senate legislations, policies on academic staff appointment and promotion, and annual reports. The goal was to identify and analyze policies, dedicated directorate mandates, and official records of community engagement

practices. This was supplemented by relevant government laws, such as Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation. The interviews, lasting up to 70 minutes, provided an opportunity for in-depth exploration of community engagement (CE) issues, focusing on institutional missions, faculty and student involvement, community partnerships, and strategies for institutionalizing CE. The semi-structured interview format encouraged participants to express their opinions and experiences freely, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of how CE is integrated into disciplinary and institutional settings. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.

Table 3. Research Tools and Methodological Framework.

Tools	Purpose	Focus	Types	Procedures	Ethical Consideration	Remarks
Document Review	To understand official missions, policies and strategies. This is not to serve as primary data but to establish robust institutional context of cases	Identifying key themes related to commitment. Policy alignment, mission, scope and typologies of engagement, structure and funding	strategic plans, senate legislations, policies on academic staff appointment and promotion, and annual reports, Ministry of Education abstracts	Systematically reviewed and coded using thematic analysis approach. Search; content analysis. Identifying phrases and statements	Publicly available materials, proper authorization was received from staff and content is interpreted and presented accurately	This tool provides initial understanding of missions and approaches
Semi-Structured Interview	To gain in-depth understanding of participants' perspective on key factors of institutionalizing community engagement	Individuals understand-ing of community engagement policies, approaches, methods, challenges, partnership, impacts, personal perceptions	37 participants were purposively selected	semi-structured interview guides with open ended questions; recorded in the campus office either in English or Amharic, transcribed; Thematic analysis	Ethical approval; Informed consent; the purpose was explained; confidentiality and anonymity; Data security was ensured, and sensitivity of the matter was noted	Semi structured in-depth data focusing on institutional factors as per the Holland Matrix

Data Analysis

To analyze the participant interviews, the Holland Matrix of Institutional commitment to service was used as the primary analytical framework (Holland, 2006). The matrix directs attention to "organizational factors that together characterize institutional choices and actions: mission; promotion, tenure, hiring; organization, structure; student involvement; faculty involvement; community involvement; and campus publications" (Holland, 2009, pp.87-88). The Matrix of Institutional Commitment to Service is a diagnostic tool to assess the congruence of higher education institutions' objectives and activities in community engagement (CE) and service-learning. It was developed in 1997 by Barbara Holland and later modified in 2006 (Holland, 1997; Holland, 2006).

This continuum is a diagnostic tool to indicate where in the matrix an organization is placed and to indicate the level of progress toward a desired goal.

Contextualizing the Holland Matrix

Although the original matrix provides strong foundation, it was modified to suit the Ethiopian higher education context and the study's focus. According to the adopted Holland Framework, there are eight dimensions of community engagement in a continuum, with relevance indicating the level of commitment by an organization. In this study, only mission, leadership support, organizational structure, and funding, communication, and fundraising are included from the Matrix. A slightly different structure from the Holland Matrix, as the challenges of community engagement institutionalization are included in the analysis. The research is expected to explore the institutionalization continuum existing in this kind of modified structure.

Analytical process

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. MAXQDA was used for the analyses. The responses were examined using a thematic analysis following the procedure suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The process involved a hybrid approach. The Holland Matrix served as a primary deductive framework. It provided the initial predetermined codes for the analysis. We familiarized ourselves with the data through repeated readings of the interview transcripts. We then systematically coded the responses using the dimensions of our modified Holland Matrix, specifically leadership and governance, organizational structure and funding, and challenges in institutionalization. However, we performed inductive refinement during the process through addition of sub-codes that emerged directly from the data. The themes that emerged from the data were not any different from the predetermined themes based on the Holland Matrix. As one would expect from the qualitative research method, the researchers used these themes and descriptions to analyze their data holistically. The matrix method allowed us to conduct a holistic comparative analysis across the two institutions as per our research questions.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The themes and sub-themes obtained from the interviews were examined independently by the colleagues. After the review, the themes were reviewed by independent researchers who were experts in the field. The researchers gave a very detailed account of the context or the setting in which the study took place. Participants were requested to check the accuracy of the content, and the inter-code reliability compliance percentage was determined. A comprehensive, well-structured, and clearly articulated coding scheme, together with an analytical framework, was used as the foundation for inter-coder reliability. Regular meetings were held among the researchers to discuss coding decisions, the development of categories and themes, and the interpretation of the findings. Using QDA software, the researcher's pilot-tested on a few transcripts before plunging into the entire application of the codes to assess inter-coder reliability. Besides, the coding process was iterative.

Role of Researchers and Ethics

Before starting the research, approval was obtained from the university's social and human studies ethics committee. Addis Ababa University College of Education and Behavioral Studies Research Ethics Committee issued the document for this study. The approval was issued on 12.31.2024, and the protocol number is CEBS_IRC_CCEPS-002/12/2024. The purpose, process,

and potential risks of the research were clearly explained to the participants. Besides, their consent was obtained. It was notified in advance that the interviews would be audio-recorded. Participants' names and other personally identifiable information were not disclosed without their permission. The researchers notified participants they had the freedom to exit the study at any time and could choose not to answer any questions they were not comfortable with. Care was taken not to evaluate the participants' conduct and statements, or to set any expectations for them.

Findings

As indicated earlier, 37 participants were included in the study for in-depth interviews. The core findings of this study are presented thematically in this section. The analysis focuses on key findings, organized and presented to highlight community engagement with a particular focus on comparing the two distinct cases. We begin by examining institutional support within each case.

Institutional support to community Engagement

This section examines and compares the institutional support for community engagement at Hawassa University and Adama Science and Technology University. According to the Holland Matrix, institutional support is arrangement and backing provided by the university's leadership to its staff. It is related to broad leadership commitment to a sustained engagement agenda with ongoing funding support and community input. A very important issue of support for implementers is organization and government support towards promoting CE and CE-related activities (Mugabi, 2015).

Leadership and Governance

At Hawassa University, the leadership, including the president, deans, Vice-president for Research and Technology Transfer, and other top officials, has emphasized the significance of participating in public speeches and internal communications, creating a relatively important component for the success of community engagement initiatives. This commitment is supported by the establishment of a directorate for community engagement, experts, and coordinators across seven campuses. A participant who is a leader in community engagement noted, "We have dedicated bureaus and offices for community engagement... we have dedicated experts for this office." This structural commitment reveals that despite the Ministry of Education directive allotting only 15 % of the time to community engagement, the university has given strong focus to this mission. Participants believe when senior leadership continuously promotes commitment, it becomes an integral part of the culture (institutionalized) rather than becoming a simple addition. However, what we observe from the interview data is disconnect between each speech demonstrated by the leadership's commitment to participation and its impact in setting the tone for how the rest of the staff operates their business. These participants in the current study reported "sometimes initiatives are one-time events". Therefore, one critical factor of commitment, institutional support, is not sustainable. Establishing long-term ties with community partners is sometimes elusive, suggesting disjointed leadership commitment, a critical factor for the university to keep institutional commitment to engagement so that the staff can do their involvement and support at the center of their academic programs, not just as an extracurricular activity but as a component of the curriculum itself. This may limit full institutionalization of engagement.

In contrast, at ASTU, the interview data showed a different, more structured perspective on leadership support. Although staff, administrators, and community engagement coordinators have different opinions on the priorities, stages, methods, and goals of leadership support, the university's

commitment is evident through its mission, organizational structure, and practical initiatives. For example, participants highlighted "15% weight has been allotted" to community engagement in promotion criteria, indicating a clear, measurable commitment. As one middle management staff member noted, "It is not easy. That much contribution is required if he/she must be promoted." The mention of a specific percentage indicated a structured and formalized system. This may indicate the system is still in a transitional stage of engagement, being mentioned, but may still be challenging to fulfill.

Organizational Structure and Funding

The contrast in institutional commitment is evidenced through practical and operational support. At Hawassa University, a participant noted a dedicated community engagement directorate with a middle-level leadership position has been established to oversee activities. This is further decentralized by the presence of associate research deans in all colleges who coordinate community engagement activities at the college level. The College of Health Sciences has a separate directorate because of numerous activities. This approach aligns with the themes identified in Table 4, such as explicit commitment, decentralized support, and cross-institutional service. The university's president and the vice-president for research and technology transfer directly participate in a large demand-driven community project. Regarding funding, HU receives a regular government budget, with 3% allocated for community engagement based on government regulation. Besides, the university leverages around 97 international collaborative projects, some of which have a community engagement element, to secure additional financial support.

Table 4. Within-case Analysis: Hawassa University Institutional Support.

Emergent Theme	Summary of Findings
Explicit Commitment	University-wide commitment to quality education, impactful research, and community engagement without transparent budget lines
Leadership Endorsement	University's senior administrators emphasize the vital role of participation in achieving the university's vision.
Decentralized Support, Cross-Institutional Service	President establishes the Office of Community Engagement to promote sustainability
Departmental Support	Deans highlight regular community-based engagement within the college
Operational Support	Vice-President for Research and Technology Transfer coordinates services

The data in Table 4 were obtained from thematic analysis of interviews. The emergent themes represent primary categories as listed in the first column. In contrast, at ASTU, the leadership commitment is not only structural, but the community input is systematically integrated into the design, evaluation, and approval of projects. This is a step higher than mere consultation as it involves active partnership and co-creation. This is full integration of how community involvement is operationalized and how the structure supports partnerships. The leadership's commitment is demonstrated through various actions, policies, and resource allocation. As one faculty member from school of pharmacy noted, "The ASTU leadership is committed to community engagement because they facilitate training for staff members. They facilitate seminars on how to support

the community and on how to conduct applied research." Another academic staff member from school of Water Engineering corroborated this, describing how the leadership is fully committed to identifying, communicating with respective areas, and facilitating engagement in terms of supporting the staff, motivating staff, and mobilizing resources to successful activities. A leader in community engagement mentioned,

> Let me start with the president. Then, we have the Vice-President for Research and Technology Transfer, and under it, there are three wings. One is the research wing. Then, a technology transfer and industry linkage wing. Then, we have the community engagement directorate's wing. This office has two sub-wings. The first one is a community service coordinator. The other is science development coordinator. In each college, we have an associate dean for research and technology transfer coordination (ParticipantCED1, personal communication, January 27, 2025).

This contrasts with HU's model of a separate directorate and a decentralized network of support. Adama Science and Technology University's approach to community engagement, in addition, is evident through a rigorous assessment process for demand-driven requests and a "feasibility study". The community input is systematically integrated into the design, evaluation, and approval of the project, defined by its mission as specialized university in science and technology. Furthermore, the university has developed ten thematic focus areas in science and technology. It has both a strategy of responding to the demands of the community and developing proactive plans to address the needs of the community. These elements are characteristics of manifesting engagement as central and defining institutional missions and approaches, full integration according to the Holland matrix. Although the two universities have dedicated units (see Table 1), their approaches to funding and accountability differ significantly. According to some participants, ASTU has implemented several strategies to ensure accountability and proper management of funds allocated for community involvement. These include financial information obliging a project owner to submit progress reports to monitor the utilization of funds. Some participants from ASTU noted the university is subject to internal and external audits and compliance with financial regulations, and promotes transparency in the allocation and utilization of resources. These mechanisms align with the themes in Table 5 regarding transparency and accountability mechanisms and decentralized financial management. However, some ASTU academic staff disagreed about the transparency of the budget lines. This indicates some concern regarding internal budgetary allocations. A faculty member said, "I don't believe there is transparency". Interview data showed lack of transparency and sustainability of funding mechanisms has forced staff to search for part-time jobs instead of creating community impact. This is echoed by another participant who has doubts about the transparency of the budget process, and he feels some kind of systemic exclusion in winning projects. When he was asked about transparent information, He said:

> I believe only some are winning community engagement projects, and I don't participate in proposal competitions because I predict the outcome would be negative. Whether it is transparent or not, I don't know. I'm not sure if we are also required to know about all this information. They don't have that experience (ASTURPA9, personal communication, January 2025).

This indicates tension between the university's formal commitment and its practical implementation.

Table 5. ASTU Within-case Analysis: Funding, Resources, and Sustainability.

Emergent Themes	Major Findings
Multiple funding Sources	Diversified funding strategy
Internal budget allocations	Core funding commitment
External funding pursuit	Seeking external partnerships
Decentralized financial management	Need for clearer oversight
Transparency and accountability mechanisms	Formal procedures for financial oversight
Potential resource constraints	Limitations on project implementation
Need for more specific reporting on fund utilization	Room for more detailed transparency
Inconsistencies in budget allocation	Need for consistent budget planning.

The data in Table 5 were obtained from thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews conducted with ASTU participants. The emergent themes represent primary categories as listed in the first column. In contrast, analysis of data from HU showed lack of concrete information about individual budget lines or the percentage of the overall university budget dedicated to community participation. The leaders did not sufficiently clarify the specific allocation for community engagement within a framework, and the amount of internal funding remains unknown. Moreover, the interview data showed participants were unaware of specific internal funding allocation, which could require further inquiry to establish how Hawassa University finances its commitment. We have seen that the Holland framework shows relationship between the depth and nature of their community engagement efforts with vertical organizational factors and the horizontal continuum of institutional commitment. The establishment of the offices of community engagement at the universities helps to promote sustainability (a relationship of dimensions and components) with well-defined dimensions and a continuum of commitment. But the Holland community engagement institutionalization framework is much more complicated, suggesting this office plays a vital role in maintaining engagement efforts by providing resources, facilitating partnerships, and recognizing faculty and students for their contributions. Building the capacity of staff and other stakeholders is desired for the institutionalization of community engagement. But it is developing long-term ties with community groups and incorporating participation into academic curriculum that could facilitate the institutionalization.

Challenges In Institutionalizing Community Engagement

The dimension of challenges in institutionalizing engagement relates to how stakeholders who play different roles in an organization perform in their roles to achieve the objectives of the organization smoothly. Although both universities express strong commitment to community engagement, the interviewees perceive remarkable connection between the institution's objective and engagement performance, which is grounded in the availability of infrastructure, institutional support, mission, and other stakeholders' support and involvement dimensions. Many of these are shared challenges which are complicated because of the presence of various issues, such as structural, attitudinal, resource, policy, reward, relational and communication challenges. The

purpose here is to explore these challenges with regard to any of the different dimensions of institutionalizing community engagement. All interviewed faculty in both universities believed community engagement is helpful in moving towards more genuine and reciprocal relationships with community partners (in terms of overcoming challenges). They said: "It can sometimes be difficult to establish reciprocal relationships with community partners…that both sides benefit from the engagement, rather than the community simply being an object of study". Both universities have faced common challenges inherent in the Ethiopian higher education system. Participants' data showed resource constraints, a lack of stronger linkages with the community in research, and a deficit of effective mechanisms for assessing the impact of engagement activities (Desta & Belay, 2018). They have expressed a gap between what the community expects and what the institution can give financially, and managing those expectations may be difficult. The leadership, in turn, complained that it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of community involvement programs. One can therefore note discussion forums, workshops, and evaluation methods must be utilized to measure effectiveness. A deeper analysis revealed each university faces distinct challenges reflecting its unique approach and support.

At Hawassa University, the main participants at management level did not capture the meaning of institutionalizing community engagement. They gave wrong answers to the meaning of 'institutionalizing community engagement'. It refers to the process by which university integrates community engagement into its core missions, identity, and operations. But Dean of one of the colleges at the university boldly said, "Community engagement is institutionalized in our university. At least, we have a structure or dedicated office in the university. We have that mission. But we need a budget." Staff at the university claim the university is required to provide improved incentives for teachers to participate in community-based projects to achieve institutionalization. A senior professor reports how he complained about the incentive problem:

> *Some departments have begun to incorporate engagement work into the tenure and promotion processes; others continue to favor research outputs. I believe our dedication to community participation and cooperation is slowly developing, but I suggest this disparity and shortage of budget and incentives for community engagement activities must be fixed (HawassaRPH25, personal communication, February 2025).*

Contrary to the leadership of HU, who believe community engagement extends beyond tokenistic gestures, staff reported a lack of guarantee to meet actual local needs and objectives. They asserted this as one of the major factors affecting its institutionalization. We have previously observed Hawassa University's implementation of community engagement is evolving from isolated activities to the realization of formally recognizing, organizing, and administering stage. However, the evidence further suggests the prevalence of challenges such as lack of proper facilities, equipment, and transportation impede service delivery and program outreach. A coordinator from Sidama National Regional State Agriculture research office emphasized a challenge in the partnership, remarking: "We face challenges in maintaining long-term relationships with employees due to different expectations and conflicts." This shows a gap between project-based collaboration and long term two-way sustainable relations with the community. He expressed a need for a strong research network of farmers to generate knowledge for long-term education and research networks. Interview data showed the siloed implementation of community engagement activities at Hawasaa University leads to lack of cohesion and missed opportunities for meaningful collaboration. An external stakeholder from the Ministry of Education stated:

We require the focus of community engagement and service offered by universities to include professional services like consulting, outreach, and development, and training. But the activities can sometimes be confined to specific departments or units, and there is lack of clarity in technology transfer mechanisms and duplication of efforts (MOERPM36, personal communication, February 2025).

A comprehensive community engagement plan that aligns with a university's overall strategic goals is acceptable and is developed by higher education institutions in advanced countries. But one wonders how this could work in Hawassa University without robust evaluation metrics to measure impact of initiatives. Conversely, ASTU faces a challenge rooted in resource constraints and a lack of transparency despite demonstrating a strong commitment. Indeed, according to participants, issues such as resource limitations, coordination, the need for more robust evaluation, and ensuring genuine reciprocity in community partnerships need to be addressed. A recurring theme across the interviewed participants is limitation of resources, both financial and human. These issues impact the scale and scope of community engagement efforts. As one participant from Geology Department noted:

My observation is simple one, and it is based on ASTU's focus on engagement, science, and technology. One of our primary challenges is scarcity of financial and human resources. This lack of resources also contributes to absence of community input and insufficient feedback integration (ASTURPA7, personal communication, January 2025).

The participant's observation resembled the challenge faced by Hawassa University, which focuses on securing resources and getting more consistent funding sources. This is grounded in a clear need for better coordination and strategic planning across the different departments and units involved in community engagement. The findings from the community partner interview show although the university provide different services to the community, the relationship appears to be unidirectional. Adama city mayor's official labeled the process being initiated by the university. According to one university official, even if the city mayor is a member of the university Board, a formal point of community representation, it is viewed through strategic lens. The city mayor's official, however, reported technological and digital trainings offered by the university increased confidence in using digital tools essential for their daily work. He expressed enthusiasm for applying these skills to improve service delivery to citizens. This data from community beneficiaries reveals co-creation and mutual decision making are important to move form unidirectional service to community engagement. A participant from Electric Power and Control Engineering Department said:

The current criteria for evaluating community service are vague, lacking specific metrics or processes. There is a lack of information and specific data on the number of students or community members who participate in these activities, their frequency, or the impact of these engagements. This lack of quantifiable data makes it difficult to evaluate ASTU's efforts (ASTURPA10, personal communication, January 2025).

These findings reveal that although institutionalization of community engagement can be established at a high level, the day-to-day practical work of institutionalizing it is often hindered

by institutional factors unique to each institution. Increasing resource allocation for dedicated units and developing more comprehensive strategies for measuring and reporting the outcomes of their community-focused activities are our explanation for this concluding view. Although the themes of institutional support and the challenges were present at both universities, a cross-case comparison highlights key distinctions in their overall engagement models as summarized in the table 6.

Table 6. A cross-case Comparative Summary.

Characteristic	HU	ASTU
Approach	Comprehensive, service-oriented, multi-disciplinary	Specialized, problem-solving, technology-focused
Primary Goal	Holistic socio-economic development	Applied scientific and technological advancement
Initiative	Agriculture, health, legal services, peacebuilding, and book donations	Digital literacy, industry collaboration, and science culture promotion
Beneficiaries	Diverse local communities and regions	Industries, government bodies, and specific technological sectors
Theoretical Alignment	Broad community service and outreach	Targeted industry linkage and technology transfer

The data in Table 6 were authors' synthesis of thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews and documents. In addition to their differing overall approach, a comparative analysis revealed significant differences in the specific challenges faced by the participants.

Table 7. Comparative Analysis of Challenges.

Challenge	HU	ASTU
Common Challenges	Systematic and institutional, mission, leadership support, and funding challenges.	Systematic and institutional challenges. Mission, leadership support, and funding challenges.
Unique Challenges	A gap between community expectations and financial capacity. Insufficient incentives	The need for more robust evaluation and genuine reciprocity in partnerships
	Amount of internal funding is not transparent.	Consistent limitations on financial and human resources. Distrust in budget transparency, feeling systemically excluded.
	Conceptualization impeding implementation	Lack of trust and transparency.

The data in Table 7 were the authors' synthesis of thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews.

Discussion

The comparative case study revealed that both universities showed commitment to community engagement. However, HU focused on supporting engagement largely through structural and resource dedication. In contrast, ASTU's support is systematically integrated through formalized policies and reward systems. In addition to the findings related to organization and structure, this study found specific mandates of these units were similar. That means the coordination centers in both universities have focused on planning, implementation, and fostering community relationships. The staffing and funding allocated to these directorates at both universities have been somewhat similar in terms of staffing and funding, too. Both HU and ASTU have a dedicated staff. The strategic planning of both universities indicated community engagement has been integrated. But the extent and specific goals varied. The impact and outcomes of community engagement activities have been reflected in the academic publications and research of both universities. Hawassa University's research covered a broader spectrum of community-related issues, including social sciences, health, and agriculture. Adama Science and Technology University's research, however, tended to be more focused on technological applications and sustainable development. Still, it has been demonstrating community relevance. Despite these similarities, a key paradox emerges from the data when accountability was examined, raising questions about the respective systems.

For Hawassa University, the findings suggest the community engagement office needs to expand its capacity to coordinate and support initiatives across all colleges and departments. The researchers recommend enhancing the university's ability to respond effectively to community needs by developing formal agreements based on reciprocity and mutual learning with community partners. To encourage greater participation of faculty and students in community engagement activities, incentives and recognition mechanisms need to be introduced. This could include incorporating community-engaged scholarship into promotion criteria. We recommend mandatory service-learning and practicum opportunities for students. Adama Science and Technology University's focus is on technology transfer, which is valuable. But the university could explore opportunities to broaden its community engagement initiatives. The university should further explore mechanisms for involving community members. This could be in the identification of research priorities and the dissemination of research findings. A robust monitoring and evaluation system should be developed. The university could use feedback from community partners and beneficiaries to continuously improve its initiatives.

Implications for Practice in Ethiopia

The findings from this comparative case study contribute to institutional commitment to community engagement. Findings in this study support previous studies on the importance of dedicated structures, adequate resources, and a culture of collaboration and reciprocity that have been important dimensions for institutionalization of community engagement in any university. Other similar Ethiopian higher education institutions should integrate community engagement into their mission and strategic planning. This will undoubtedly move them from tokenistic statements to practical commitment. Establishing dedicated units or directorates with clear mandates and sufficient resources is an important factor. Academic staff involvement and support in community-based research and outreach are important factors. Therefore, universities need to recognize and reward staff. Other similar universities in Ethiopia should stress developing meaningful and reciprocal partnerships with community organizations. Such relations should always be based on mutual benefit and shared ownership of initiatives for sustainability. A robust planning, monitoring, and evaluation system of community engagement should be developed for both the community and the university.

Conclusions

This comparative case study revealed that both institutions demonstrated a commitment to community engagement. However, they follow different approaches shaped by their institutional missions and academic foci. Hawassa University showed a broader range of community-focused initiatives, while Adama Science and Technology University focused more on technological expertise and industry linkages. The study has analyzed their strategies, organizational structures, and research activities. Valuable insights into the current state of institutional commitment to community engagement in Ethiopian higher education have been provided. The recommendations offered might guide both universities. However, the researchers hope this might potentially benefit other institutions in Ethiopia. We aim to guide them towards enhancing their efforts to serve their communities more effectively. Thus, the crucial "third mission" of higher education in Ethiopia is realized and universities contribute to national development meaningfully.

Limitations

The findings, particularly regarding effectiveness, impact, and sustainability, are limited by a small sample of community voices. Although we included a community partner from each case, this provided only a limited perspective. The majority of the data comes from university staff and administrators. This makes the assessment unidirectional. A comprehensive evaluation of commitment requires more beneficiary input to provide a balanced view. These limitations show a need for future research that prioritizes a robust and multi-stakeholder approach.

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Breaking the Cycle of Hunger Through Short-Term Skill Acquisition Among Senior Secondary School Students in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the effect of short-term skill acquisition intervention strategy on hunger reduction among senior secondary school students in Ogun State, Nigeria. The study adopted a mixed-method research design. The population comprised all teachers, principals and indigent students and their parents in the 8 oldest flagship public senior secondary schools in the four divisions of Ogun State as well as officials of the State Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Three instruments; Hunger Vulnerability Questionnaire, Short-Term Skill Acquisition Training Guide and Key Informant Interview guide were adopted for data collection. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis while quantitative data was analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, mean, standard deviation and analysis of covariance. Findings suggested a moderate hunger rate among senior secondary school students in Ogun State. Also, the result revealed that there was a statistically significant main effect of Short-term skill acquisition on household hunger among Senior Secondary School students in Ogun State. The study concluded that that short-term skill acquisition has a significant effect in reducing the hunger prevalence rate among senior secondary school students.

KEYWORDS: Short-term, skill acquisition, hunger, secondary students

Introduction

Hunger is a global issue. It is a phenomenon that is found in developing and developed countries around the world. However, it appears that hunger is more prevalent in developing countries than developed ones. Food, no doubt is a physiological need of every man. Children need food for survival and appropriate physical, mental and emotional development while adults need food to stay alive and carry out their daily transactions. However, the world is currently contending with a serious economic condition which has led many citizens to experience different degrees of hunger. Regrettably, the prevailing harsh economic condition in the country has incapacitated some parents/guardians from their responsibilities of providing food and other essential supports for their children. The hunger rate is so alarming that some secondary school students who naturally needed regular and balance food to perfect their development are also experiencing hunger, while some of them had dropped out of school. The 2023 World Bank report stated that the hunger rate in Nigeria stood at 42.2% and still persists, suggesting that the trend of hunger is on the increase. Also, the

National Bureau of Statistics (2023) presented the alarming trends of hunger index in Nigeria as 48.4, 48.4, 46, 46, 40.1 and 63 per cent for 2003, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2019 and 2023, respectively. Sadly, Nigeria was ranked 110th out of 127 countries in the 2024 Global Hunger Index (GHI, 2024). This is a source of serious concern to many and has led to public outcry among members of the public. Although, several strategies (including conditional cash transfer and home-grown school feeding program at the basic education level) had been implemented by the Nigerian Government to cushion the effect of hunger, they appeared ineffective.

Previous studies conducted by Kugonza et al. (2015) and Chinasa et al. (2022) have therefore suggested alternative strategy such as service learning and skill acquisition, respectively to combat hunger among school children, especially secondary school students. This is due to the consistent indication in literature suggesting appreciable success where skill acquisition had been implemented (Jacobs & Micheal, 2025; Adamu & Ayuba, 2024). Short-term skill acquisition strategy is a planned, time-bound intervention that equips secondary school students with practical, job-relevant, and life-oriented skills within a relatively short period of time. Although, the Short-Term Skill Acquisition strategy had been successfully implemented at the higher institutions of learning as work-study program (Omonijo et al., 2020), there are strong indications that the strategy could be considered as a viable option to solve the challenge of hunger at the secondary school level. Therefore, this paper assessed the prevalence rate of hunger among secondary school students and determined the effect of Short-Term Skill Acquisition intervention strategy on hunger reduction among secondary school students in Ogun State.

Some parents are finding it difficult to provide regular, adequate and quality food for their children, thereby compromising their physical, mental and emotional development as well as limiting their school attendance and academic achievement. Stakeholders are therefore worried that if something urgent is not done to reverse the ugly development, it could result in high rate of malnourished population, prevalence of different childhood diseases, increase in national expenses on health care and escalate the bloated illiteracy rate in the society. Although, short term skills acquisition strategy had been successfully adopted to combat the menace of hunger among students at the higher institutions in some countries, it has not been implemented at the secondary school level. This is the gap that this article has come to fill by establishing the effect of short-term skills acquisition intervention on reduction of hunger among secondary school students in Ogun State. The broad objective of this study is to determine the effect of short-term skill acquisition strategy on reduction of hunger rate among secondary school students in Ogun State. The specific objectives of the study are as follows: (1) To ascertain the level of prevalence of hunger among secondary school students in Ogun State, (2) To examine the main effect of short-term skill acquisition on hunger reduction rate among secondary school students in Ogun State.

Literature Review
Hunger Prevalence in Nigeria

The 2023 UNICEF report also offered empirical insights into the nutritional status of women and adolescent girls in Nigeria. According to the report, approximately 7.3 million adolescent girls and women of reproductive age were undernourished as of 2023, marking a significant rise from 5.6 million in 2018. The data were derived from household surveys and nutrition assessments conducted in collaboration with the Nigerian government and international partners. The report highlighted that undernutrition in adolescent girls not only impacts their immediate health but also contributed to a generational cycle of malnutrition, especially for future pregnancies (United Nations Children's Fund, 2023a). Shapu et al. (2020) in their study on food security and hygiene practices among

adolescent girls in Maiduguri Metropolitan Council, Borno State, Nigeria, used a cross-sectional design to examine the prevalence of food insecurity and its associated factors. The findings revealed that a substantial proportion (73.5%) of adolescent girls experienced food insecurity, with 19.2% categorised under moderate food insecurity. The study identified key correlates such as schools, age of mother, and occupation of mother. These variables were statistically significant in predicting food insecurity levels among the adolescents. A report by Anyaogu (2024) based on data from Nigeria's Cadre Harmonisé assessment presents an alarming increase in acute food insecurity, and revealed that over 31.8 million Nigerians were affected as of mid-2024 up from 18.6 million in late 2023. The empirical data highlighted in the report were drawn from systematic food security and vulnerability assessments conducted across multiple Nigerian states, including Ogun. The study attributed the rise in food insecurity to persistent conflict in the northern region, inflation, and policy shocks such as the removal of fuel subsidies. These factors have directly eroded household purchasing power, disrupted supply chains, and inflated food prices.

Short-Term Skill Acquisition

The Short-Term Skill Acquisition Strategy as the name implies refer to the training of people in simple vocational skills within a short period of time, say a month or week, empowering them to practice for financial gains. The strategy has been successfully practiced in several countries around the world. It is the ability to be trained on a particular simple task or function and become expert in it. Globally, college students' involvement in part-time jobs has increased to support themselves and supplement their family income (Dawar, 2025). The current economic situation in Nigeria suggested that sustainable economic activities in form of short-term skill acquisition that will help people (especially school children) to overcome the current economic hardship impacting on food security should be considered. The nature of work that could fit under this initiative are phone repairs, confectionaries, catering, dress making, machine assemblage, candle and soap making. These jobs as noted by Birt (2025) are not in any way infringing on the fundamental rights of children but beneficial to them by having access to extra cash to support their feeding and sustain their education.

Methodology
Research Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-method research design involving both qualitative and quantitative research approaches at the same time (Gay et al., 2012). The qualitative approach adopted a narrative research design to capture the lived experiences of participants through in-depth interviews to narrate on how hunger had affected their household and schooling. Their personal stories provided insights into household hunger before the intervention which was used to complement the quantitative findings. The quantitative approach in this study adopted the pretest, posttest, control group quasi-experimental research design with 2x2 factorial matrix layout. The independent variable is the treatments with two levels (short-term skill acquisition and control) while the dependent variable is household hunger.

Experimental group 1:	O_1	X_1	O_3
Control group 2:	O_2	X_0	O_4

Where O1, and O_2 represent pretest hunger vulnerability scores of participants in experimental and control groups, respectively; O_3, and O_4 represent post-test scores of participants

in experimental and control groups, respectively; while X_1, and X_0 represent treatments for group 1 (short-term skill acquisition intervention) and group 2 (control), respectively.

Population, Sample and Sampling Techniques

The population of this study included teachers, principals and indigent students and their parents in the 8 oldest flagship public secondary schools in the four divisions of Ogun State, Nigeria. It also involved officials of State Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The sample size for the study was 427 participants that comprised 8 principals, 16 teachers, 400 students, parents, and 3 officials of the Ministry of Education and Technology. The 8 principals were selected using total enumeration. The 16 teachers were purposively selected based on their utility status. The 400 students were purposively selected based on their vulnerability to dropout of school as identified by their class teachers. The students were selected from 8 public secondary schools in the four divisions of Ogun State (Remo, Ijebju, Yewa, and Egba). The selected schools were: Yewa College, Ilaro, Comprehensive High School, Ayetoro, Abeokuta Grammar School, Idi Aba, African Church Grammar School, Ita-Iyalode, Remo Secondary School, Sagamu, Remo Divisional High School, Sagamu, Ijebu-Ode Grammar School, Ijebu-Ode and Ijebu Muslim College, Ijebu-Ode. Three Ministry officials were purposively selected based on the vast information at their disposal on senior secondary education and their ability to effectively grant key informant interview.

Research Instruments

Three research instruments were developed by the authors for the current investigation. These include Students' Hunger Vulnerability Questionnaire (SHVQ), In-depth Interview Guide, and Short-Term Skill Acquisition Training Guide. Students' Hunger Vulnerability Questionnaire (SHVQ) was used to collect data on the risk of secondary school students to hunger. This questionnaire was adapted from Household Hunger Scale by Ballard et al. (2011). It has a total of 8 items structured on potentially experienced food deprivation at household level over the past 4 weeks using four-point Likert scale of Zero time (never), Rarely (1-2 times), Sometimes (3-10 times), and Often (> 10 times). The In-depth Interview Guide were developed to collect qualitative data from parents on the feasibility and effect of Short-Term Skill Acquisition strategy, and to provide firsthand insights into household hunger and poverty risk. The Short-Term Skill Acquisition Training Guide is a module developed by the researchers alongside three highly-skilled and experienced artisans who specialized in phone repairing and accessories. The training manual was used as treatment package for participants in the experimental group.

Description of Short-Term Skill Acquisition Intervention

This intervention used in this field experiment was designed as a practical, school-based programme which aimed at equipping senior secondary school students with immediately usable income-generating skills that is capable of addressing short-term hunger challenges. The intervention focused on skills that are simple to learn, require no start-up capital, and have high demand within the local communities. These could be basic activities such as agro-processing, small scale catering and snacks production, soap and detergent making, basic tailoring and fabric repairs, phone repairs and accessories, or digital services with mobile applications. The current study experimented with phone repairing as a short-term skill acquisition intervention. The training was conducted over a period of four weeks with sessions held after school hours to avoid academic class disruption. Instruction was hands-on and delivered by qualified and experienced artisans in phone repairs. Teachers were trained to facilitate the sessions using demonstration, guided practice

and peer collaboration methods to ensure that participants were active and master the skills. In implementing the intervention, participants were paired with local artisans within their communities for two weeks in order to translate the acquired skills into real-life income opportunities that could help them meet their basic feeding needs while remaining in school. Participants in the experimental group were supported with shared equipment from their artisan mentors. The researchers ensured that child safety, supervision, and time regulation were strictly observed to prevent exploitation and academic distraction throughout the training program. Monitoring and follow-up activities were conducted to track students' use of the acquired skills and its effect on their ability to access food regularly.

Instrument Development, Validation and Reliability

The in-depth interview guide on household hunger used for the qualitative approach was carefully developed to elicit detailed narratives of participants parents lived experiences of hunger before the sort-term skill acquisition intervention. This allowed the authors to gain firsthand insight into prevalence of hunger among senior secondary school students in the study area. The development process began with an extensive review of related literature on household hunger and food insecurity to identify domains such as meal frequency, food quality, emotional effects of hunger, household coping strategies, and the impact on schooling. Thereafter, open-ended questions were framed in simple language to encourage free expression while probes were included to deepen responses without leading the interviewees. The draft interview guide was reviewed by two experts in educational research and social welfare. These experts assessed the relevance and clarity of each interview question to ascertain its content validity. Their suggestions informed revisions that improved logical flow, reduced ambiguity, and ensured sensitivity to students' backgrounds. The authors conducted a pilot study in February, 2025 with a small group of students outside the study sample to test the clarity and timing of the questions, thereafter, minor adjustments were made to the interview guide. Transparency and trustworthiness were further strengthened through triangulation, member checking, and detailed documentation of the interview process.

The SHVQ instrument which is an adaptation of the Household Hunger Scale developed by Ballard et al. (2011) was modified in terms of item structure to suit the cultural background of students in the study area. The content and face validity of the SHVQ instrument was established through expert opinions of three Professors of Measurement and Evaluation and Educational Management. These experts evaluated the items for relevance, adequacy, and suitability for the target population. The draft instrument was refined based on their feedback to improve comprehension. Thereafter, a pilot test was conducted twice on twenty parallel respondents within an interval of two weeks. The test-retest reliability method was used to establish the coefficient of stability of the questionnaire. The coefficients of stability obtained was .87 for Students' Hunger Vulnerability Questionnaire. This result indicated an acceptable reliability coefficient confirming that the questionnaire was stable and suitable for measuring student hunger vulnerability in the experiment.

Procedure for Data Collection

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of Tai Solarin Federal University of Education, Ijagun, and permission was sought from the Honorable Commissioner, Ogun State Ministry of Education, Science and Technology before the researchers proceeded to the field for data collection. Field experiment was conducted between March and May, 2025. The researchers visited each of the selected school to obtain permission from the principals for the students' participation in the study and also educate them on the purpose of the research work and what

they stand to gain from it. The administration was done in phases: pre-sessional activities, pre-test, treatment, monitoring and evaluation, sustainability and follow-up, and post-test. The pre-session activities include the screening, recruitment, and assignment of participants to the experimental group and control group. The researchers alongside a certified trainer in mobile phone repairs used an average of 60 minutes per day for training sessions on participants in the experimental group for four weeks by following the pre-designed treatment package template steered with the same pre-test and post-test instruments after their respective training sessions.

Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic and narrative analytical procedures to provide a rich understanding of the prevalence of hunger. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and carefully read several times to achieve optimum familiarization with the data. Initial coding was conducted by identifying meaningful statements, phrases and stories related to hunger experiences before the participation in the intervention. These codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes that reflected recurring patterns across participants' narratives. Direct quotation strategy was used to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the data so that qualitative findings accurately represented the participants' voices. On the other hand, while the quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, descriptive mean and standard deviation to summarize students' hunger status from the questionnaire responses which was used to establish the baseline data. Inferential statistics of Analysis of Covariance was used to test the hypothesis by comparing the household hunger scores of the experimental and control groups, as well as pre-test and post-test scores. The null hypothesis was tested at .05 level of significance using the SPSS computer software program.

The results obtained in this study were divided into three main sections: demographic information, the qualitative results and the quantitative findings. The findings are presented below.

Participants' Demography

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Participants' Students (n = 400).

Variables		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	243	60.8
	Female	157	39.3
Age	less than 15 years	92	23.0
	15-18 years	284	71.0
	above 18 years	24	6.0
Class	SS1	193	48.3
	SS2	148	37.0
	SS3	59	14.8
Residence	Urban	174	43.5
	semi-urban	173	43.3
	Rural	53	13.3
Living with	Parents	353	88.3
	Family	30	7.5
	Relatives	12	3.0
	foster care	2	0.5
	Alone	3	0.8

Data Source: Researchers' field experiment data (2025)

The result in Table 1 showed that out of the total 400 students who participated in the study, 243 (60.8%) were males, while 157 (39.3%) were females. This indicated a higher representation of male students in the sample, suggesting either a gender imbalance in school enrollment or a possible male-dominated participation in the skill acquisition program. Age distribution of participants showed that the majority, 284 students (71.0%) were between 15 and 18 years old, which aligned with the typical age range for senior secondary school students in Nigeria. Ninety-two participants (23.0%) were younger than 15 years, possibly indicating early starters or accelerated learners. Only 24 participants (6.0%) were above 18, which reflected students who have repeated classes or started schooling late. Participants were drawn from all three levels of Senior Secondary School. SS1 students made up the largest group with 193 students (48.3%), followed by SS2 students with 148 (37.0%), and SS3 students at 59 (14.8%). The lower number of SS3 students may be due to proximity to external exams, causing a lower participation rate or early school-leaving trends. Participants were nearly evenly splitted between urban (174 students, 43.5%) and semi-urban (173 students, 43.3%) areas, while 53 students (13.3%) came from rural communities. This distribution suggested the study captured a balanced representation from diverse geographic settings in Ogun State, which is essential for understanding how locality affects dropout and poverty-related challenges. Table

1 also showed that a significant portion of the students, 353 (88.3%), lived with their parents, indicating a traditional family structure. A smaller percentage resided with family members (7.5%), relatives (3.0%), or in foster care (0.5%). Notably, only 0.8% lived alone, which highlighted the vulnerability of a very small group who may lack direct family support. These living arrangements have implications for economic stability and educational sustainability.

Qualitative Results of Key Informant Interviews

Thematic Analysis of Participants' Responses to the Prevalence of Household Hunger: The key informants here were parents of the study's participants (students). Four themes emerged from parents through the analysis of transcribed notes and interviews.

Theme 1: Food Scarcity and Unpredictability

Q1: Was there ever no food of any kind (bread, rice, garri, etc.) available in your home due to a lack of funds?

Among the parents, majority frequently spoke of lack of evening meals making do with whatever is available, and not being able to meet their children's preferred food choices. One of the parents responded that:

> *There are many occasions I will start thinking from midday on how evening meal [supper] will go. Sometimes we usually end up taking whatever is available at our disposals. The evening meals decide what will come up in the morning before the children go to their various schools. In my capacity I tried to meet up with their needs and not what they cherish to eat. The economy is harsh sir! (KII: PT, 2025).*

These responses indicated chronic food insecurity where households did not consistently have enough food and often rely on low-quality or insufficient meals. It points to economic constraints affect daily nutrition.

Theme 2: Skewed Prioritization and Skipped Meals

Q 2: Did you or any other family member go to bed hungry because there wasn't enough food?

Majority of the interviewees (parents) reported skipping lunch and managing with little at night as common events. The parents prioritized children's meals over their own, and often going to bed without eating. One of the interviewees stated that:

> *I just said it! Food is a scarce commodity nowadays. If you eat well in the morning, that of the afternoon is usually skipped, and at night you only have the option to manage what you have in the house. That has been the case over the last two years. There are countless times I go to bed without meals. My effort is first channeled to what the children will eat or take to school the next day (KII: PT, 2025).*

These responses pointed that hunger is normalised affecting both children and adults. Such coping strategies highlight household-level deprivation and systemic poverty, influencing students' ability to learn and concentrate.

Theme 3: Extreme Hunger on the Horizon

Q3: Because there wasn't enough food, did you or any other family member go an entire day and night without eating?

While most families have not yet experienced an entire day without food, the majority of the interviewees acknowledged being on the brink of that level of deprivation. An interviewed parent noted that:

> *We don't pray for such [that is hunger at the extreme]. But if proper intervention is not done on the current food crisis in the market, there is a thin line rope separating the current situation from that (KII: PT, 2025).*

These responses indicated that the situation is precarious. The fear of extreme hunger suggested vulnerability and the potential for worsening food insecurity if no interventions occur.

Theme 4: Competing Priorities under Economic Hardship

Q 4: What are the main causes of poverty in your town, in your opinion, and how do these causes interact to impact people and families?

The majority of the parents attested that their households were forced to choose between essentials (e.g., food, education, housing, and healthcare). Some revealed that that an attempt to provide for one often means sacrificing the others. One key informant made a revelation that:

> *This dispensation has triggered poverty in various forms. The usual way we cope with daily expenses has changed totally. The rule of thumb now is to afford one aspect of life and neglect the others. If you exert your earnings on good foods, that means you should be ready to neglect quality education. If you put all your earning on good accommodation, you should be ready to neglect proper healthcare and so on. This is now a new norm (KII: PT, 2025).*

This economic dilemma revealed systemic poverty. In such conditions, families were unable to maintain balanced livelihoods, directly impacting children's schooling, health, and emotional well-being. The above qualitative results provided insights that hunger is widespread among Senior Secondary School students' household in Ogun State, not as an occasional crisis but as a daily or weekly reality. Also, it could be deduced that poverty was pervasive which manifested through difficult trade-offs in basic needs, unstable food supply, and unmet educational requirements. Parental coping strategies such as skipping meals, prioritizing children's food, or accepting substandard living conditions were indicative of both chronic poverty and imminent risks of severe hunger. These findings are in line with the quantitative analysis results of prevalence of hunger and poverty where a grand mean of 1.25 on the Students' Hunger Vulnerability Questionnaire indicated moderate hunger among public secondary school students (see Table 2).

Analysis of Quantitative Data

Q1: What is the level of hunger prevalence among secondary school students in Ogun State?

Table 2. Prevalence of Hunger Among Participants of Senior Secondary Schools in Ogun State.

In the past 4 weeks or 30 days:	Responses (%)				Mean	SD
	N	R	S	O		
Were you concerned that there wouldn't be enough food in your home?	19.8	47.3	23.0	10.0	1.23	0.881
Did a shortage of resources, such as money, prevent you or any other household member from eating the meals you preferred?	19.0	40.3	19.3	21.5	1.43	1.029
Did a shortage of resources force you or any household member to eat a restricted range of foods?	19.0	38.3	29.8	13.0	1.37	0.935
Did you or any other family member have to consume some things that you truly didn't want to eat because there wasn't enough money to get alternative foods?	20.0	53.0	16.5	10.5	1.18	0.870
Because there wasn't enough food, did you or any family member have to eat a smaller dinner than you felt you needed?	31.3	21.5	30.0	17.3	1.33	1.093
Did the lack of food force you or any other family member to eat fewer meals each day?	32.0	40.5	23.3	4.3	1.00	0.851
Did you or any other family member go to bed hungry because there wasn't enough food?	36.8	15.3	37.8	10.3	1.22	1.054
Because there wasn't enough food, did you or any other family member go an entire day and night without eating?	29.5	24.8	37.8	8.0	1.24	0.967
Grand mean					1.25	0.960

Results in Table 2 showed that the grand mean hunger score for all participants was 1.25 (SD = 0.960). Based on the study's criteria, where a mean between 1.01 and 2.00 indicated moderate hunger, the overall level of hunger among Senior Secondary School students in Ogun State fell within the moderate hunger range. This suggested that a considerable number of students frequently face food-related challenges that could affect their academic engagement and performance. The mean response to the item "Were you concerned that there wouldn't be enough food in your home?" was 1.23 (SD = 0.881). This reflected moderate levels of worry about food insecurity, suggesting that many students live in households where uncertainty about food availability is a recurring concern. The relatively low standard deviation indicated that this experience was fairly common

across participants. On the item "Did a shortage of resources, such as money, prevent you or any other household member from eating the meals you preferred?", the mean was 1.43 (SD = 1.029). This score also fell within the moderate hunger category, showing that limited dietary variety due to poverty was a shared experience among the participants. The slightly higher standard deviation reflected more varied experiences among households. A mean of 1.37 (SD = 0.935) was recorded for the question on eating a limited variety of foods, which highlighted continued resource-related constraints on nutrition. Students often had to rely on monotonous meals, which is another indicator of moderate food insecurity with possible implications for their physical and cognitive development.

Results in Table 2 also indicated that students reported a mean of 1.18 (SD = 0.870) on being forced to eat undesirable foods due to lack of alternatives. This again confirmed moderate hunger conditions. Though the mean is slightly lower, the consistent pattern suggested a coping mechanism where families prioritized any available food over preferences. A relatively higher mean of 1.33 (SD = 1.093) was recorded for the item on eating smaller meals than needed. This demonstrated that students often consumed insufficient quantities of food, which could directly impact their concentration and academic output. The high standard deviation indicated a wide range of experiences, with some students more severely affected. A lower mean of 1.00 (SD = 0.851) was reported for eating fewer meals in a day, placing this experience on the borderline between little-to-no hunger and moderate hunger. Although it showed that meal skipping is less frequent than other hunger indicators, it still affected a significant portion of the participants. The mean responses to "Going to bed hungry" and "Going a whole day and night without food" were 1.22 (SD = 1.054) and 1.24 (SD = 0.967) respectively. These items are particularly alarming as they indicated episodes of severe deprivation. While they still fell within the moderate range, the implications are serious: a non-negligible number of students have experienced intense hunger, which can hinder their academic performance and overall well-being.

H1: There is no significant effect of short-term skill acquisition on hunger reduction among secondary school students in Ogun State.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Post-test on Household Hunger Scale.

Treatment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Short-term skill acquisition	200	4.81	1.213
Control	200	11.96	5.809
Total	400	8.39	5.512

Table 4. Adjusted Means of Participants' Post-test on Household Hunger Scale.

Treatment	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Short-term skill acquisition	4.719[a]	.257	4.212	5.225
Control	12.051[a]	.257	11.545	12.558

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Pre Household Hunger Scale = 9.9950.

Table 5. Analysis of Covariance of Post-test Household Hunger by Treatment.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	6861.082[a]	2	3430.541	258.939	.000	.566
Intercept	2627.663	1	2627.663	198.338	.000	.333
Pre House hunger	1748.832	1	1748.832	132.003	.000	.250
Treatment	5366.583	1	5366.583	405.073	.000	.505
Error	5259.628	397	13.248			
Total	40244.000	400				
Corrected Total	12120.710	399				

a. R Squared = .566 (Adjusted R Squared = .564)

Table 6. Pairwise Comparisons of Adjusted Means for Household Hunger for Each Experimental Group.

(I) Treatments	(J) Treatments	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Short-term skill acquisition	control	-7.333*	.364	.000	-8.049	-6.616
Control	Short-term skill acquisition	7.333*	.364	.000	6.616	8.049

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.
b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least significant difference

    The results in Table 3 showed that the participants with the lowest mean of household hunger was observed in the Short-term skill acquisition treatment group ($\bar{X}$ = 4.81, SD = 1.213) while the highest mean of household hunger was observed among participants in the Control group ($\bar{X}$ = 11.96, SD = 5.809). The estimates in Table 4 showed that in the control group, the adjusted mean was 12.051 compared to the unadjusted mean of 11.96, while in the Short-term skill acquisition treatment group, the adjusted mean was 4.719 compared to the unadjusted mean of 4.81. The covariate pretest was set at 9.995 which is the average value for pretest for household in this study. From the adjusted mean scores, it could be deduced that the Short-term skill acquisition treatment group showed reduced household hunger, and only the adjusted mean of participants in this group, had its adjusted mean lesser than the average value of the pretest household hunger which was set at 9.995. The result in Table 5 showed that there was a statistically significant main effect of Short-term skill acquisition on household hunger among Senior Secondary School students in Ogun State, $F_{(1, 397)}$ = 405.073, p < .05. From the pairwise comparison in Table 6, it can be seen that household hunger was greater in the Control group compared to Short-term skill acquisition treatment group, a mean difference of 7.333 (95% CI, -8.049 to -6.616). These results confirmed that Short-term skill acquisition training program significantly lowered household hunger among public Senior Secondary School students in Ogun State.

Discussion

The results showed that moderate hunger was prevalent among Senior Secondary School students in Ogun State. This condition affected not only the quantity and quality of food intake but also led to psychological stress and physiological strain. The relatively consistent mean scores across items reinforced the reality that food insecurity is a common experience, potentially affecting retention and academic outcomes if not urgently addressed. The observed moderate hunger levels among senior secondary school students in Ogun State aligned with broader regional trends. A study conducted in Sagamu township, Ogun State, reported that 45% of in-school adolescents experienced food insecurity, with 34.7% faced moderate levels. Factors such as maternal education, living arrangements, and behavioral aspects were significantly associated with this food insecurity (Shapu et al., 2020).

These findings point to the pervasive nature of hunger among adolescents in the region, and at the national level. Nationally, Nigeria has witnessed a significant rise in food insecurity. As of August 2024, over 31.8 million Nigerians were reported to face acute food shortages, a sharp increase from 18.6 million in late 2023 (UNICEF, 2023b). This surge was attributed to factors such as insecurity, the removal of fuel subsidies, and rising inflation, which have collectively deteriorated living conditions and led to widespread malnutrition, particularly among women and children (Anyaogu, 2024). These national challenges inevitably impact adolescents, including those in Ogun State. The moderate hunger levels observed among students in this study could potentially hinder students' cognitive development and academic success. This finding was in consonance with the findings of Shapu et al. (2020) who linked food insecurity to malnutrition, poor health, and low academic performance among adolescents. Food insecurity among adolescents has far-reaching implications beyond immediate hunger. It adversely affects their nutritional status, health outcomes, and educational attainment. Also, gender disparities in nutritional status are evident in Nigeria. A UNICEF report highlighted that 7.3 million adolescent girls and women of reproductive age in Nigeria are undernourished, a significant increase from 5.6 million in 2018. This undernutrition posed risks not only to the women themselves but also to their offspring, emphasizing the need for targeted nutritional interventions (UNICEF, 2023a).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed that short-term skill acquisition can make a positive difference in helping public senior secondary school students cope with hunger and financial difficulties constraining their academic study. The findings clearly indicate that when students are taught simple, practical skills that can be learned within a short time, they are better able to earn small amounts of money to support their basic needs, especially feeding, without abandoning their schooling. This means that hunger which often distracts students, causes absenteeism, and reduces concentration in class, can be reduced when students are empowered with useful skills they can apply within their immediate communities. The significant main effect found in this study confirmed that skill acquisition is not just an academic idea but a real and workable solution that can improve students' wellbeing. Therefore, providing students with practical skills alongside regular classroom teaching can help break the cycle of hunger and give them a better chance of completing their education in Ogun State, Nigeria. The demonstrated effectiveness of short-term skill acquisition in reducing hunger among school students calls for the need to integrate vocational training into the mainstream secondary school curriculum. Policymakers therefore need to consider developing a comprehensive framework that embeds skill acquisition programs as a core component of the educational system, particularly in public schools serving low-income communities. Such a policy

would not only improve school retention but also equip students with practical competencies that enhance their employability and self-reliance.

Recommendations for Planning and Policy Implementation

Based on the findings of this study, the authors suggest the following for planning, policy and practice. Policymakers in the Ministry of Education should integrate short-term skill acquisition program into the secondary education system as a deliberate policy response to student hunger and economic vulnerability. This can be done by embedding market-relevant vocational and entrepreneurial short-term skill trainings such as agro-processing, digital services, catering, soap making, phone repairs, and basic ICT freelancing into the formal school curriculum as compulsory and examinable subjects. For long-term sustainability, policy implementation should involve collaboration between Ministry of Education, Ministry of Youth and Employment, technical colleges, local artisans, private sector, and small and medium sized enterprises to ensure that the skills taught are relevant to labor market demands. Adequate funding streams should be institutionalized through government budgetary allocations, public-private partnerships, and donor organizations to provide training materials, functional workshops, starter packs, and qualified short-term skill trainers in public schools. Implementation guidelines should also stipulate time allocations for short-term skill acquisition strategy adoption in schools so that it will not disrupt core academic learning. This could be done termly, annually or biennially depending on that pathways that could enhance students' employability beyond secondary school. As a palliative measure, the current National Homegrown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP) that caters for nutritious meals to primary school pupils in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025) should be extended to the senior secondary school level by the federal and state governments to support students during short-term skill acquisition training in order to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and food insecurity among public secondary school students in Ogun State.

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Examining the Challenges of Inclusive Education in Ethiopia: The Case of Addis Ababa Inclusive Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education for students with disabilities in primary schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document review from teachers, school principals, and itinerant teachers. Despite formal legal and policy frameworks supporting inclusion, findings reveal persistent gaps between policy and practice. Key challenges include negative attitudes among educators, school leaders, parents, and the wider community; inflexible teaching methods and curricula that inadequately address learner diversity; physically inaccessible school environments; and limited resources, including adaptive materials, assistive technologies, and trained support personnel. These challenges are interrelated, reflecting systemic, social, and institutional barriers rather than deficiencies in students themselves. Analysis through the Social Model of Disability and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights how exclusion operates across multiple levels—from classroom interactions and school leadership to policy, societal norms, and cultural beliefs—underscoring the complexity of achieving meaningful inclusion. The study emphasizes that addressing these barriers requires a coordinated approach, including enhanced teacher preparation and professional development, strengthened school leadership, infrastructural adaptations, increased funding, and active community engagement. By illuminating the multidimensional factors that constrain inclusive education in Addis Ababa, this research provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders committed to promoting equitable educational opportunities for all students.

KEYWORDS: inclusive education, ecological systems theory, school leadership, Ethiopian education system

Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged globally as a central priority in contemporary education systems, aiming to create learning environments in which all students, including those with disabilities, learn together in mainstream schools with equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities. Rooted in principles of equity, participation, and respect for diversity, inclusive education emphasizes flexible curricula, differentiated instruction, active learning approaches, and responsiveness to individual learner needs (Booth et al., 2001). Beyond its pedagogical dimensions, inclusive education is widely recognized as a human rights issue. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) affirm education as a fundamental right and place responsibility

on governments to remove barriers that prevent learners with disabilities from participating fully and equally in education. These frameworks emphasize that exclusion is not an individual deficit but a result of social, institutional, and attitudinal barriers.

Despite strong international commitments, evidence from many developing countries indicates that students with disabilities continue to experience limited access to quality primary education (UNESCO, 2006). While policies promoting inclusive education are increasingly adopted, their implementation remains uneven. This persistent gap between policy intentions and educational realities suggests that inclusive education cannot be understood merely as a technical or infrastructural issue but must also be examined through social, cultural, and institutional lenses Ainscow et al., (2006). In Ethiopia, inclusive education is formally endorsed through national policy instruments, including the Education and Training Policy (MoE, 2023) and the Special Needs Education Strategy (MoE, 2006). These policies articulate commitments to integrating children with disabilities into regular schools and addressing both their educational and social needs. However, despite these policy commitments, the practical implementation of inclusive education, particularly in Addis Ababa, remains challenging (MoE, 2018). The persistence of these challenges points to a policy–practice gap, where formal inclusion policies coexist with school environments that are not fully prepared to support diverse learners.

While little strides towards promoting inclusive education through various initiatives was made, the gap between policy intentions and real-world application remains significant (MoE, 2018). While national policies have been put in place to support the inclusion of students with disabilities, there remains a disconnect between the aspirations of these policies and the realities of school environments, teacher preparedness, infrastructure, and societal attitudes. Despite a growing awareness of the importance of inclusive education, there is a noticeable gap between policy and practice, leaving many students with disabilities in educational environments that are not truly inclusive. This puzzle of failing to achieve inclusive education despite well-established policies warrants deeper investigation. The challenge lies not in the absence of policies but in the complex factors that prevent their full implementation. The government's commitment to inclusive education is clear in policy documents, but on the ground, schools face numerous hurdles in realizing these policies. Although policy frameworks emphasize the need for inclusive education, these systems often do not adequately address the real challenges that educators, students, and school leaders face in making inclusion a reality. This study, therefore, seeks to explore why, despite national-level policies and frameworks promoting inclusive education, effective and consistent implementation remains a significant challenge in primary schools in Addis Ababa. Understanding the reasons behind this gap between policy and practice is essential for developing strategies that can lead to more effective inclusive education systems in the future. The study is guided by the following research question: What are the challenges of implementing inclusive education in Addis Ababa inclusive primary schools?

Literature Review

This literature review adopts a conceptual perspective that views inclusive education as a multidimensional process, shaped by structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors. Rather than treating inclusion as a purely physical or technical arrangement, the review highlights how educational systems, professional practices, and social attitudes interact to either enable or constrain inclusive education.

Global Perspectives on Inclusive Education

Globally, inclusive education is grounded in the principle that all learners, regardless of disability, have the right to participate in quality education within mainstream settings (Ainscow, 2005). While international policies strongly endorse inclusion, empirical studies consistently demonstrate challenges in implementation. These include insufficient resources, limited teacher preparation, rigid curricula, and persistent negative attitudes toward disability (Norwich & Lewis, 2007; Schuelka, 2013; UNESCO, 2017). Research further shows that successful inclusive education depends not only on physical access but also on supportive school cultures, leadership commitment, and community engagement (Ainscow, 2005). Where these conditions are absent, inclusive education policies often remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Inclusive Education Policies and Practice in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, inclusive education policies reflect international commitments and emphasize equity and access for learners with disabilities. Inclusive education has been emphasized through national policies and frameworks aimed at integrating children with disabilities into regular schools. The Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (2023) and the Special Needs Education Strategy (2006) both stress the importance of inclusivity in the country's education system. These policies were designed to create equitable educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities. The Ministry of Education's (MoE) 2018 Education Sector Development Program also highlights the commitment to inclusive education, aiming to accommodate students with disabilities by providing necessary support and resources.

However, the gap between these policies and their effective implementation is a critical issue. While there is a legal and policy framework in place, study by Asnake, (2016) have shown that many schools continue to face significant challenges in fully integrating students with disabilities. Although policies are well-intentioned, there are substantial barriers at the school level, including a lack of resources, inadequate teacher training, and resistance from communities and educators who may not fully understand or support the goals of inclusive education Mohammed & Hassen, (2015). Furthermore, societal attitudes towards disability remain a significant barrier in Ethiopia, with disability often seen as a stigma that limits the willingness of parents and teachers to fully embrace inclusive education Fekadu, (2017).

School Leadership and Teacher Preparation

School leadership plays a critical role in fostering inclusive school environments. Inclusive leaders support teachers, allocate resources strategically, and promote school cultures that value diversity Florian & Linklater, (2010). In Ethiopia, however, research suggests that many school leaders lack specific training in inclusive education, limiting their ability to guide teachers and institutionalize inclusive practices Birhanu, (2018). Teacher preparation is similarly central. Studies consistently highlight that teachers' confidence, knowledge, and attitudes significantly influence inclusive practices. In Ethiopia, limited pre-service and in-service training in inclusive education has left many teachers feeling unprepared to address learner diversity, resulting in reliance on traditional teaching approaches that are misaligned with inclusive principles (Fekadu, 2017; Haug, 2017).

Socio-cultural Attitudes and Physical Conditions

Inclusive education is also deeply shaped by societal beliefs and cultural perceptions of disability. In many Ethiopian communities, disability continues to be associated with stigma, low expectations, and social exclusion, which affects parental engagement, peer relationships,

and teacher attitudes Fekadu, (2017). These socio-cultural factors can undermine inclusion even when policies and resources are in place. Physical conditions further interact with these social dimensions. Inaccessible school infrastructure, unsuitable classroom arrangements, and limited learning materials restrict participation for students with disabilities Tirussew et al., (2013); Dawit, (2014). Importantly, these physical barriers are not merely technical shortcomings but reflect broader institutional priorities and social valuations of inclusion.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature indicates that while Ethiopia has made progress in establishing inclusive education policies, significant challenges persist at the level of implementation. These challenges arise from the interaction of structural constraints, limited professional capacity, and entrenched socio-cultural attitudes toward disability. However, there remains limited empirical research that examines how these factors collectively shape inclusive education practices in Addis Ababa inclusive primary schools. By situating inclusive education challenges within this multidimensional framework, the present study seeks to deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which the policy–practice gap is produced and sustained.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides a comprehensive analysis of the key obstacles hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. By highlighting not only material and structural constraints such as resource shortages, inadequate teaching strategies, and physical inaccessibility, but also deeply rooted social perceptions and negative attitudes toward disability, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of why inclusive education policies have not translated into meaningful practice. In particular, it reveals how deficit-oriented beliefs, stigma, and low expectations held by educators, school leaders, parents, and the wider community shape exclusionary practices and limit the participation of students with disabilities. The study further underscores the importance of addressing these challenges through comprehensive and systemic interventions that extend beyond the provision of physical resources. Such interventions include transforming social and cultural perceptions of disability, strengthening teacher preparation for inclusive pedagogy, improving institutional leadership and accountability, allocating resources more equitably, and fostering sustained community engagement. By situating inclusive education within its broader social and cultural context, this research provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and educational leaders seeking to promote equitable learning opportunities for all children. Ultimately, the study contributes to efforts aimed at advancing inclusive education as a socially responsive and rights-based practice, rather than a purely technical or infrastructural reform.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by the Social Model of Disability, complemented by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the challenges of implementing inclusive education in Addis Ababa inclusive primary schools. Together, these frameworks enabled the study to move beyond individual-centered explanations of disability and instead examine the structural, social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape inclusive education practices.

Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability emerged from disability rights movements and challenges the traditional medical model that locates disability within individual impairments. Rather than viewing disability as a personal deficit, the social model conceptualizes disability as the outcome of social, cultural, attitudinal, and environmental barriers that restrict the participation of persons with disabilities Oliver, (2013). From this perspective, exclusion results not from impairment itself but from inaccessible environments, discriminatory practices, and negative societal attitudes.

In relation to inclusive education, the Social Model of Disability emphasizes the need to identify and remove systemic barriers within educational systems, including rigid curricula, inaccessible infrastructure, exclusionary policies, and deficit-oriented beliefs about learners with disabilities Slee, (2018). This model aligns closely with the core principles of inclusive education, which prioritize equity, participation, and the right of all learners to be educated within mainstream settings. Accordingly, the present study adopted the social model to frame inclusive education challenges as institutional and social problems, rather than as limitations inherent to students with disabilities. The social model was particularly relevant to the Ethiopian context, where negative cultural perceptions of disability, limited resources, and institutional constraints continue to influence educational access and participation. By adopting this framework, the study focused on how attitudes, policies, leadership practices, and school environments contributed to the exclusion or marginalization of learners with disabilities in primary schools.

Ecological Systems Theory

While the Social Model of Disability explains why barriers exist, Ecological Systems Theory Bronfenbrenner, (1979), Bronfenbrenner & Morris, (2006) provides a structured way to analyze where and how these barriers operate. Ecological Systems Theory conceptualizes human development as shaped by interactions within multiple, interconnected systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. In this study, the ecological framework was used to examine inclusive education challenges across different levels of the education system. At the microsystem level, interactions among students, teachers, school leaders, and families influenced daily inclusion practices. Teachers' beliefs, preparedness, and classroom strategies played a critical role in shaping learners' experiences. The mesosystem captured the relationships between schools and families, highlighting how limited institutional support placed additional burdens on families of children with disabilities.

The exosystem encompassed structures that indirectly affected schools, such as teacher education institutions, professional development systems, and administrative support mechanisms. Insufficient training opportunities and limited leadership preparation for inclusive education emerged as key challenges at this level. At the macrosystem level, national education policies, cultural norms, and societal attitudes toward disability shaped expectations and priorities related to inclusion. Finally, the chronosystem accounted for historical and policy shifts, including the legacy of segregated special education and the gradual transition toward inclusive education frameworks.

Integrating the Frameworks

By integrating the Social Model of Disability with Ecological Systems Theory, this study conceptualized inclusive education challenges as multidimensional and interconnected, arising from interactions between individuals and their broader social and institutional environments. This combined framework guided the analysis and interpretation of findings, enabling the study to examine how structural conditions, leadership practices, professional capacity, and socio-cultural

attitudes collectively influenced the implementation of inclusive education in Addis Ababa inclusive primary schools.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore challenges to inclusive education in inclusive primary schools of Addis Ababa. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the challenges of inclusive education are socially constructed, contextually embedded, and shaped by the lived experiences of multiple stakeholders. It enables to capture participants' voices, meanings, and perspectives, as well as the institutional and contextual factors influencing inclusive education. Rich, descriptive data generated from interviews, observations, and document analysis illuminated the complexity of inclusive education challenges as experienced in real-world school settings (Dangal, 2009; Creswell, 2014).

A Multi-site Qualitative Case Study Design

A multisite qualitative case study design was employed to examine challenges to inclusive education across five selected inclusive primary schools in Addis Ababa. Multisite case studies allow for an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in multiple contexts, providing broader insights than single-site studies Baxter & Jack, (2008). This design enabled the identification of common and context-specific challenges, increasing the credibility and transferability of findings. The overarching research question guiding the study was: *"What are the challenges of implementing inclusive education in Addis Ababa inclusive primary schools?"*

Sampling Method and Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants and sites based on their ability to provide rich information on inclusive education challenges Patton, (2002). Five inclusive primary schools were purposively chosen based on their experience and role as resource centers supporting inclusive education implementation. Participants included school principals, itinerant teachers, and classroom teachers, selected for their direct involvement in inclusive education practices. School principals are educational leaders responsible for providing overall leadership and direction in schools, overseeing administration, curriculum implementation, and teaching–learning processes, and creating a school culture that supports inclusive education. Itinerant teachers are specialist support teachers who work across schools to facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive education by providing guidance, resources, and professional support to classroom teachers and by addressing the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. Classroom teachers are responsible for teaching all learners within the regular classroom setting, using inclusive teaching strategies to accommodate diverse abilities, learning styles, and individual needs to ensure equitable participation and learning outcomes for all students. A total of 15 participants were recruited, three from each school, one from each participant category. Sampling aimed to achieve information richness and data saturation, consistent with qualitative research principles Braun & Clarke, (2019).

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

School	Participant Type	Gender	Years of Experience	Role Description
School- one	School principal	M	15	Oversees school administration and learning
	Itinerant teacher	M	5	Inclusive education specialist facilitating implementation of inclusive education
	Class room teacher	F	10	Teaches all students within regular classroom setting
School- two	School principal	F	12	Oversees school administration and learning
	Itinerant teacher	M	6	Inclusive education specialist facilitating implementation of inclusive education
	Class room teacher	M	9	Teaches all students within regular classroom setting
School- three	School principal	F	10	Oversees school administration and learning
	Itinerant teacher	M	9	Inclusive education specialist facilitating implementation of inclusive education
	Class room teacher	F	13	Teaches all students within regular classroom setting
School- four	School principal	M	17	Oversees school administration and learning
	Itinerant teacher	M	7	Inclusive education specialist facilitating implementation of inclusive education
	Class room teacher	F	11	Teaches all students within regular classroom setting
School- five	School principal	M	14	Oversees school administration and learning
	Itinerant teacher	M	8	Inclusive education specialist facilitating implementation of inclusive education
	Class room teacher	F	16	Teaches all students within regular classroom setting

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document review, and classroom observation. Using multiple methods facilitated triangulation and enhanced the credibility and depth of findings (Astalin, 2013);White, 2013). Interview was the primary data collection method. An interview guide was developed around a broad, open-ended question: *"What are the challenges you face in implementing inclusive education?"* Guiding and probing questions elicited participants' experiences, perceptions, and contextual insights. Interviews were conducted in Amharic at participants' workplaces and recorded with consent. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, Patten, (2002). The interview guiding questions were prepared in English. Nevertheless, after translation, the interviews were conducted in Amharic because of its convenience to express ideas well, recorded (upon their consent), and "transcribed verbatim". All interviews took place in participants' natural school settings and were conducted in a manner that encouraged open and reflective dialogue. Probing questions were used to clarify meanings, explore emerging issues, and obtain rich, detailed data relevant to the study's purpose. This approach ensured consistency across interviews while allowing sufficient flexibility to capture the complexity of inclusive education challenges across multiple sites.

Relevant school and policy documents were reviewed, including: school timetables, minutes of meetings, reports, student exercise books, national and regional inclusive education policies, and Ministry of Education reports. Document review complemented interview data by providing contextual and procedural information on inclusive education practices, Lee (2016). When combined with interviews and document review, observation provides a more comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of inclusive education practices and challenges, strengthening the credibility of the findings through triangulation White, (2013). Classroom and school environment observations were conducted to capture real-time interactions, behaviors, and contextual barriers. Each site was observed for approximately one hour, focusing on accessibility, student participation, and teacher-student interactions. Detailed descriptive and reflective field notes were taken, and photographs were captured with approval from school authorities. Observations enhanced the study's credibility by revealing contextual dynamics not fully articulated in interviews.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data generated from interviews, observations, and document reviews were analyzed using an inductive, thematic approach, aligned with the multi-site qualitative case study design Argyropoulou, (2013). All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and field notes and documents were organized systematically. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts, observations, and documents to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Initial codes were developed by identifying recurring words, phrases, actions, and concepts Bøe & Hognestad, (2017). These codes were then grouped into categories based on patterns and relationships within the data. Related categories were merged to form broader themes that reflected the challenges of implementing inclusive education across multiple school sites. The study followed a structured flow, summarized below: Site Selection → Participant Recruitment → Data Collection (Interviews, Observations, Documents) → Data Transcription → Inductive Coding → Theme Development → Member Checking & Triangulation → Reporting Findings.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, established qualitative criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were applied throughout the research process. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants, thick descriptions of school contexts, and careful transcription of interviews. Member checking was conducted by providing participants with transcripts and preliminary interpretations, allowing them to validate the accuracy of the information and clarify any ambiguities. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and document reviews ensured that emerging themes were supported by multiple sources, increasing the reliability of findings. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research sites, participants, and data collection methods, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar contexts. Dependability was maintained through careful documentation of all research procedures, while confirmability was ensured by keeping an audit trail of decisions made during data collection and analysis, demonstrating that findings were grounded in the data rather than researcher bias Creswell (2014).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigor was maintained throughout the study to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and procedures of the research, and their voluntary participation was obtained through signed consent forms. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to participants, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports. All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and documents, were stored securely in password-protected digital files to prevent unauthorized access. Care was taken to avoid sensitive or potentially distressing questions, and participants were provided with opportunities to clarify or amend their responses during member checking. These ethical procedures safeguarded participants' dignity, promoted trust, and reinforced the integrity and credibility of the study, Palaganas et al. (2017)

Findings

This study examined the major challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools. Analysis of interview data from classroom teachers (T), school principals (P), and itinerant teachers (IT) generated four interrelated themes that directly address the research question: attitudinal challenges, pedagogical challenges, structural challenges related to physical accessibility, and resource-based challenges. These themes emerged through a systematic process of coding, categorization, and thematic abstraction.

Attitudinal Challenges toward Inclusive Education

Negative attitudes toward inclusive education emerged as a major challenge across participant groups, including teachers, school leaders, parents, and the wider community. A school principal explained the persistence of stigma at the community level:

Many in the community, including parents and staff, still view children with disabilities with stigma and misunderstand their needs, which makes it difficult to implement inclusive education effectively. (P4)

Teachers associated negative attitudes with inadequate preparation and institutional support:

The lack of resources and the poor condition of classrooms are significant factors in the negative attitudes we see among teachers. When we don't have the right materials or proper training, it becomes hard to support students with disabilities, leading to frustration and rejection of inclusion. (T1)

An itinerant teacher highlighted the gap between stated support and actual practice:

While some teachers express support for inclusive education, their lack of knowledge about effective strategies for teaching students with disabilities shows. Positive attitudes are not enough without proper training. (IT1)

These accounts indicate that attitudinal challenges are shaped by both personal beliefs and systemic constraints, and they significantly affect how students with disabilities are perceived and supported in schools.

Pedagogical Challenges: Teaching Methods and Curriculum Content

Participants consistently reported that existing teaching methods and curriculum content are insufficiently responsive to learner diversity, constituting a major challenge to inclusive education. A classroom teacher described the difficulty of accommodating diverse learners:

I find it really challenging to manage the differences among my students. With such big class size, it's difficult to provide personalized attention that students with disabilities require. (T2)

Another teacher emphasized the rigidity of instructional expectations:

We are expected to teach all students the same way, even when some clearly need different approaches. (T5)

These responses suggest that teacher-centered instructional practices, large class size, and limited pedagogical flexibility constrain teachers' ability to support students with disabilities effectively.

Structural Challenges: Physical Inaccessibility of School Environments

Physical inaccessibility of school infrastructure emerged as a significant barrier to inclusive education. A school principal noted:

Many schools, including ours, are not physically accessible for students with disabilities. Classrooms on upper floors without elevators are a serious barrier for students using wheelchairs. (P5)

Teachers also described how classroom environments limit participation:

The seating arrangements, the noise level, and the overall space in the classroom are not conducive to inclusive education. (T3)

An itinerant teacher emphasized the impact on students with sensory impairments:

Many schools have major barriers like inaccessible classrooms and poor seating arrangements, which make it difficult for students with disabilities to participate fully. (IT2)

These findings show that even when students with disabilities are formally enrolled, physical environments often prevent meaningful participation.

Resource-Based Challenges: Inadequate Materials and Support Systems

Inadequate resources were identified as a pervasive challenge affecting all aspects of inclusive education. A school principal explained:

Our budget allocation for special education is insufficient, which makes it hard to ensure that students with disabilities get the support they need. (P3)

Teachers highlighted the lack of instructional materials and support staff:

There is a noticeable lack of teaching aids like braille materials, and we also lack trained support staff. (T4)

An itinerant teacher added:

Many schools I visit don't even have basic materials like braille books or auditory devices. Students are expected to learn without the tools they need. (IT3)

Another itinerant teacher also added:

There is no assistive technology for students with visual impairment needs such as large prints to teach them through touching, compact discs, and also talking calculators and other necessary equipment. (IT4)

These accounts indicate that resource shortages significantly limit schools' capacity to provide equitable and inclusive learning opportunities.

Discussion

This study explored the challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools from the perspectives of teachers, school principals, and itinerant teachers. The findings demonstrate that inclusive education is constrained by interconnected attitudinal, pedagogical, structural, and resource-related challenges, rather than by physical or material factors alone. Interpreted through the Social Model of Disability and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, these challenges reflect socially and institutionally produced barriers that restrict participation of students with disabilities.

Attitudinal Challenges and the Social Construction of Disability

Negative attitudes toward students with disabilities emerged as a pervasive challenge operating across schools and communities. Consistent with earlier studies (Tirussew & Alemayehu, 2007; Asrat, 2013), stigma, low expectations, and misconceptions about disability continue to undermine inclusive education. From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, these attitudes represent socially constructed barriers that disable learners, rather than limitations inherent to the students themselves Shakespeare, (2014). Teachers' frustration and resistance toward inclusion, often linked to inadequate training and resources, illustrate how systemic shortcomings are translated into negative perceptions of students with disabilities. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, attitudinal barriers operate at multiple levels. At the microsystem level, teacher attitudes shape daily classroom interactions. At the mesosystem level, weak collaboration between teachers, parents, and school leadership reinforces exclusion. At the macrosystem level, cultural beliefs and societal norms surrounding disability sustain stigma. These findings align with global inclusive education debates emphasizing that attitudinal change is central to sustainable inclusion (UNESCO, 2017).

Pedagogical Challenges and Inflexible Teaching Practices

The findings reveal that pedagogical practices remain largely inflexible and teacher-centered, limiting responsiveness to learner diversity. This confirms earlier research indicating that rigid curricula and standardized teaching approaches undermine inclusive education Desalegn, (2006), Belay, (2007); Florian & Black-Hawkins, (2011). Within the Social Model of Disability, exclusion arises when pedagogical systems are designed for a "normative" learner, forcing students with disabilities to adapt rather than accommodating diversity. From an ecological perspective, these pedagogical challenges are shaped by constraints at the exosystem level, including limited professional development and institutional support, and at the macrosystem level, where examination-oriented curricula restrict flexibility. These findings contribute to inclusive education debates by reinforcing that inclusion requires transformation of teaching and learning processes, not merely physical placement of students in mainstream classrooms.

Structural Barriers and Physical Inaccessibility

Physical inaccessibility of school environments emerged as a critical structural challenge. Consistent with national and international research Dawit, 2014; Jennings et al., (2011), inaccessible buildings, classrooms, and seating arrangements restrict participation of students with disabilities. The Social Model of Disability conceptualizes these barriers as disabling conditions created by the environment rather than by impairment. Ecologically, such barriers reflect failures at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, where decisions about infrastructure design and funding are made, yet their impact is most acutely felt at the microsystem level in students' everyday experiences. These

findings reinforce inclusive education debates that identify physical accessibility as a foundational requirement for meaningful inclusion.

The study demonstrates that inclusive education is not hindered by a single factor but by a constellation of socially produced, institutionally sustained, and structurally embedded barriers. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated interventions targeting attitudes, pedagogy, infrastructure, and resources across ecological levels. Without such a holistic approach, inclusive education risks remaining a policy aspiration rather than an educational reality.

Conclusion

This study examined the challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education in inclusive primary schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, within a context where legal, policy, and programmatic frameworks formally support inclusion. Despite this policy commitment, the findings demonstrate that inclusive education remains constrained by interrelated attitudinal, pedagogical, structural, and resource-based challenges, underscoring a persistent gap between policy intentions and school-level realities. Drawing on the Social Model of Disability, the study shows that barriers to inclusion arise not from students' impairments but from social, institutional, and environmental conditions that limit participation. Negative attitudes among teachers, school leaders, parents, and the wider community continue to shape exclusionary practices, often reinforced by inadequate professional preparation and limited institutional support. Pedagogical practices characterized by rigid curricula, teacher-centered instruction, and limited responsiveness to learner diversity further restrict meaningful inclusion. In addition, physically inaccessible school environments and shortages of adaptive learning materials, assistive devices, trained personnel, and financial resources compound these challenges.

Interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the findings reveal that inclusive education is influenced by interacting systems operating at multiple levels, from classroom practices and teacher attitudes (microsystem), to school leadership and institutional capacity (mesosystem and exosystem), and broader policy, cultural beliefs, and societal norms (macrosystem). This ecological interaction helps explain why the existence of inclusive education policies has not translated into consistent inclusive practices within schools. The study contributes to inclusive education debates by demonstrating that inclusion cannot be reduced to physical access or resource provision alone. Rather, meaningful inclusion requires simultaneous attention to attitudinal transformation, pedagogical reform, infrastructural adaptation, and sustained institutional support. Without addressing these interconnected dimensions, inclusive education risks remaining a symbolic policy commitment rather than an educational reality for students with disabilities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, strengthening the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that addresses policy, institutional, pedagogical, and socio-cultural dimensions simultaneously. Given the persistent gap between inclusive education policies and everyday school practices, education authorities should ensure that policy commitments are accompanied by clear implementation strategies, adequate financial support, and effective monitoring mechanisms. Inclusive education should be treated as a core component of educational planning rather than as a peripheral or specialized intervention.

At the institutional level, school leadership plays a critical role in shaping inclusive school cultures. School leaders should be provided with targeted professional development that emphasizes inclusive values, disability awareness, and organizational change. Strengthening leadership capacity

can enable principals and school managers to prioritize inclusive practices, allocate resources strategically, and foster collaboration among teachers, itinerant teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. When leadership actively promotes inclusion, schools are better positioned to translate policy intentions into meaningful practice. Teacher preparation and ongoing professional development are equally essential. Pre-service and in-service training programs should equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to respond to learner diversity, including differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, and inclusive classroom management. Professional development initiatives should also address teachers' attitudes toward disability, recognizing that positive dispositions toward inclusion are closely linked to confidence, competence, and institutional support.

Enhancing teachers' pedagogical capacity can reduce frustration, improve classroom practices, and support sustained inclusion of students with disabilities. Improving physical accessibility and resource availability is another critical area for action. Schools should prioritize infrastructural adjustments that enable students with disabilities to access classrooms and participate fully in learning activities, including the provision of ramps, accessible seating arrangements, and inclusive classroom layouts. In addition, increased investment is required to ensure the availability of adaptive learning materials, assistive technologies, and specialized support services. Providing resources such as braille textbooks, hearing aids, talking books, and trained support personnel is essential for promoting equitable participation and reducing systemic barriers to learning. Finally, meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved without addressing broader social and cultural influences. Efforts to engage parents and communities through awareness-raising initiatives are necessary to challenge stigma, misconceptions, and negative beliefs about disability. Strengthening school–community partnerships can help create supportive environments that reinforce inclusive values both inside and outside the school. Together, these measures highlight that inclusive education is a shared responsibility requiring sustained commitment and coordinated action across multiple levels of the education system.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges of implementing inclusive education in Addis Ababa, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative case study design limits the generalizability of findings beyond the selected schools and context. Second, reliance on participant self-reports may be subject to social desirability and recall bias. Third, variations in school resources and contextual conditions may influence the applicability of the findings to other regions.

Implication for Educational Planning

Future research could build on this study in several ways. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how attitudes, practices, and institutional conditions evolve over time and to assess the sustainability of inclusive education initiatives. Comparative studies across urban and rural settings, regions, or school types could provide deeper insight into contextual factors shaping inclusion. Policy-focused research is also needed to examine how national inclusive education policies are interpreted and enacted at school level, helping to identify strategies for narrowing the policy–practice gap. Additionally, further research should explore the role of community beliefs, cultural constructions of disability, and leadership practices in shaping inclusive education outcomes. By addressing these research gaps, future studies can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of inclusive education and support the development of contextually responsive, theoretically informed, and practically effective inclusive education systems.

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Challenges to Quality Assurance Practices in Ethiopian Public Universities: Related to Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies systemic challenges that impede effective quality assurance in Ethiopian public universities, characterizing these issues as significant obstacles to the attainment of global development goals and the navigation of contemporary global transitions. The study used concurrent triangulation, a mixed-methods approach, to collect quantitative data from 360 academic staff and 120 department heads, as well as qualitative insights from interviews with a diverse sample of 30 college deans, 10 internal quality enhancement directors, and 10 academic vice presidents, while 40 student council members participated in focus group discussions from ten institutions. Data analysis, guided by an integrated framework combining the stufflebeam context, input, process, product model and the quadruple helix model, included descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The results reveal significant gaps across all QA dimensions: insufficient inputs (limited resources, funding, and qualified staff), flawed processes (outdated curricula, weak pedagogies, and poor monitoring), and poor outcomes (low graduate skills and employability). Regression analysis identified resource availability, staff competence, and curriculum relevance as key factors influencing QA effectiveness. The study concludes that addressing these issues requires a transformative, ecosystem-based strategy. This involves strategic investment in resources; comprehensive policy and curriculum reforms aligned with labor market needs; robust internal QA systems that promote a culture of continuous improvement; and the enhancement of collaborative networks among academia, the government, industry, and civil society. The findings provide a vital foundation for policymakers and university leaders to develop targeted strategies that align Ethiopian higher education with the Sustainable Development Goals and the demands of 21st-century global changes.

KEYWORDS: quality assurance, ethiopian public university, cipp model, quadruple helix

Introduction

Education is a fundamental driver of human well-being and a critical source of competitive advantage in the global economy (Eslit, 2023). This is codified in international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7, which mandates that by 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development (Nguyen, 2021). In a rapidly evolving, knowledge-based economy, high-quality education cultivates the competencies required for individuals to critically engage with and improve their surroundings, thereby fostering both personal and societal success (Nigusse & Mulugeta, 2018). This educational imperative is further amplified by profound global transitions reshaping higher education, including the green transition toward climate resilience, the digital transformation of

learning ecosystems, and a pedagogical shift toward skill-based education that prioritizes critical thinking and adaptability (Sherchan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023). Concurrently, the African Union's Agenda 2063 underscores substantial investment in education as a prerequisite for prosperous and sustainable Africa (Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2019). Within this context, Abebe (2023) argues that quality assurance (QA) challenges in Ethiopian public universities represent not only isolated deficiencies but also critical systemic barriers to achieving these global and continental aspirations. This concern echoes Ethiopia's own growth and transformation plan, which advocates for equitable education and enhanced quality assurance strategies (Gollagari et al., 2022). Quality assurance (QA) encompasses the systematic evaluation and confirmation of educational inputs, processes, and outcomes against established standards aimed at enhancing quality and accountability across academic programs and institutions (Ansah et al., 2017). It is fundamentally designed to optimize the effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency of operations within higher education institutions, thereby addressing the needs of stakeholders (Komsiyah, 2021). Moreover, QA requires necessary adaptations in curricula, facilities, teaching staff, and overall educational standards (Hostetter, 2022). Although QA practices are often perceived as a Western concept, they have gained recognition and implementation in diverse educational settings worldwide as institutions strive to deliver outputs that meet societal expectations (Beerkens, 2020). Recent studies indicate a marked increase in QA system adoption among higher education institutions globally, underscoring its importance in an increasingly internationalized educational landscape (Roskosa & Stukalina, 2018). In the Ethiopian context, the literature highlights a significant gap between the ambitions of quality assurance (QA) policies and their practical implementation in Ethiopian higher education. Although national policy requires the adoption of international standards to promote academic mobility, collaborative research, and curriculum benchmarking enforced by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA), the actual implementation of these goals remains difficult (Ramdhan et al., 2025). A predominant focus on input and process aspects has left QA systems in an "infancy stage," with insufficient attention given to learning outcomes and output metrics (Ejigu, 2020). This developmental gap is worsened by the rapid expansion of universities, which strains infrastructure and resources, ultimately weakening the foundation needed for a sustainable and high-quality education system (Worku et al., 2024). As a result, despite having a clear strategic framework, the execution of QA remains inconsistent and is continually hindered by inadequate financial support, coordination issues among agencies, and varying levels of institutional readiness (Ramdhan et al., 2025).

Contemporary quality assurance (QA) frameworks in higher education have evolved beyond conventional metrics to address how institutions respond to pressing global challenges. Modern QA is increasingly defined by its capacity to navigate four pivotal transitions reshaping the university's mission (European University Association, 2024). The first is Green Transition, which involves the integration of environmental stewardship and sustainability principles across all university operations (Aspen Institute, 2024). Directly linked is the digital transition, which entails embedding digital competencies and infrastructure as core components of QA, evaluating everything from digital literacy to the pedagogical effectiveness of online learning (Hoskins, 2018). A concurrent pedagogical shift toward skill-based approaches marks a significant evolution from content delivery to cultivating essential competencies such as critical thinking and adaptability, which are vital for long-term graduate employability (AACSB Insights, 2023). Finally, QA systems are pressured to enhance the school-to-work transition by bridging the gap between academic preparation and labor market demands, ensuring that graduates possess relevant skills for seamless economic integration (Cedefop, 2024). Consequently, this research aims to critically examine

and elucidate the multifaceted challenges impeding effective QA practices in Ethiopian public universities, highlighting the urgent need for a strategic ecosystem approach that aligns QA systems with the quadruple helix collaboration model and addresses the pressing demands of green, digital, and skills transitions. To manage these transitions effectively, a collaborative ecosystem approach is essential. The Quadruple Helix (QH) model posits that sustainable QA requires synergistic collaboration among four key actors: academia, which develops relevant programs; the government, which provides policy and funding; industry, which defines skill needs; and civil society, which ensures that education addresses real-world community and sustainability challenges (Carayannis et al., 2022). In educational practice, employing the QH model for curriculum codesigns equips students with durable skills, enhances self-efficacy, and increases the societal relevance of academic programs by involving employers and community groups (Tasha Day, 2024). A robust framework for evaluating such educational ecosystems is the CIPP model, which assesses programs in four dimensions: establishing objectives **(context)**, examining resources **(input)**, identifying operational difficulties **(process)**, and measuring effectiveness **(product)** (Naidoo & Sibiya, 2019). QA is now experiencing a significant shift beyond mere compliance. To achieve transformational development goals, contemporary QA must integrate the structural analysis of the CIPP model with the collaborative networks of the QH model. This synergy promotes a responsive and resilient learning ecosystem, where educational programs are continuously improved through collaborative value creation (Stam et al., 2025; Van Mierlo et al., 2020).

In Ethiopia, the formal QA system was established in 2003 with HERQA, with institutional accountability later reinforced by Proclamations 650/2009 and 1152/2019 (Dewi et al., 2021). Despite the development of a comprehensive quality model by the successor Education and Training Authority (ETA), significant implementation challenges endure. These include limitations in terms of human resources, constrained funding, and inadequate infrastructure (Stracke, 2019; Arif et al., 2018). A major impediment is the legacy of a centralized, input-centric QA structure, which has hindered the system's capacity for the responsive and collaborative engagement required by contemporary frameworks (Abebaw, 2025; Tamrat, 2020). This structural inertia is compounded by a persistent disconnect between academic programs and economic needs, leading to a misalignment between graduate competencies and labor market demands (Abebaw, 2025). Moreover, efforts to foster collaboration among universities, industry, government, and civil society, which is central to the QH model, are hampered by weak functional linkages and a lack of shared objectives (Author, 2025; Yirga, 2025). Consequently, the transition toward a resilient learning ecosystem is challenged by institutional inertia, a deficit of strategic stakeholder integration, and a system where academic programs may prioritize faculty career preservation over collaborative value creation (Abebaw, 2025). Therefore, this research aims to critically examine the multifaceted challenges impeding effective QA practices at Ethiopian public universities. It seeks to clarify these systemic issues by leveraging the structural evaluation of the CIPP model alongside the collaborative framework of the QH model, thereby underscoring the urgent need for a strategic, ecosystem-based approach to quality assurance.

Purposes of the Study

This study systematically investigates the principal challenges impeding effective quality assurance implementation in Ethiopian public universities. Employing the CIPP evaluation model and the QH model's collaborative network framework, the analysis underscores the necessity of a strategic, ecosystem-based approach to resolve these systemic issues.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on an integrated theoretical framework that combines Stufflebeam's (2003) CIPP (context, input, process, and product) evaluation model with the collaborative Quadruple Helix model (Carayannis & Campbell, 2021). The CIPP model provides a systematic approach for identifying deficiencies across four interconnected domains: the alignment of institutional goals with broader development agendas (Context); the adequacy of resources and personnel (Input); the implementation of teaching and curricular activities (Process); and the evaluation of graduate competencies and employability outcomes (Product) (Naidoo & Sibiya, 2019). This diagnostic utility is especially relevant for analyzing Ethiopian public universities, where quality assurance has traditionally focused on input-centric approaches (Abebe, 2015; Tamrat, 2020). To advance beyond purely structural diagnostics, the CIPP model is incorporated within the dynamic innovation ecosystem described by the Quadruple Helix framework. This model posits that sustainable educational progress depends on synergistic interactions among four key actors: academia, which designs and delivers academic programs; the government, which establishes policies and funding; industry, which articulates market-relevant skill demands; and civil society, which advocates for community needs and sustainability (Carayannis, Grigoroudis, & Stamati, 2022). The resulting CIPP-QH integrated framework serves as a critical lens for navigating significant transitions redefining higher education, including the green transition, digital transformation, and the shift toward skills-based education. It also addresses the aspirations of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Africa's Agenda 2063 (European University Association, 2024). Through this combined perspective, this study critically examines how Ethiopian universities can reconfigure their quality assurance systems to achieve internal coherence while being responsive to both national development objectives and global benchmarks.

Method

This investigation employed a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed simultaneously to cross-validate the findings. The study was conducted across ten Ethiopian public universities selected to represent the diversity of the country's higher education system.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The study participants were drawn from ten public universities that were selected to reflect the diversity of the national higher education landscape, as classified by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE, 2021). The sample included one research-intensive university, three comprehensive universities, three applied universities, one education-focused university, and two technological institutions. To gain a comprehensive understanding of quality assurance practices, we engaged key stakeholders from each university, including vice presidents, college deans, department heads, academic staff, directors of internal quality enhancement, and members of the student council. The study utilized purposive sampling for qualitative information, whereas random sampling procedures were used for quantitative information. University vice presidents,

college deans, internal quality enhancement directors, and student council members were purposely selected for their positions. Random sampling techniques were used to choose department heads and academic staff at the participating universities. In total, 360 academic staff, 120 department heads, 30 college deans, 10 internal quality enhancement directors, 10 academic vice presidents, and 40 student council members actively participated in the study. To regulate the sample dimensions for this research, Tamaro Yamane's formula was employed. This formula estimates the sample size (n) on the basis of the population size (N) and margin of error (e = 0.05) at the 95% confidence level [n = {N}{1 + N(e)²}].

Instruments and Data Analysis

Data were collected via a multimethod approach that included surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews. The survey was divided into two sections, with responses measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very low" to "very high." To complement these primary sources, we also conducted a document analysis that reviewed quality assurance policies, standards, proclamations, ministerial initiatives, annual reports, and performance assessments. The data were analyzed via the seven-stage mixed-methods framework proposed by Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003). This process includes data reduction, presentation, correlation, consolidation, and integration, allowing for a thorough examination of the dataset. The responses from the questionnaires underwent both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including the mean and standard deviation, were calculated to summarize the data. According to the classification established by Rensis (1932), the mean scores from the Likert scale items were interpreted as follows: 1.00–1.80 (strongly disagree), 1.81–2.60 (disagree), 2.61–3.40 (moderate), 3.41–4.20 (agree), and 4.21–5.00 (strongly agree). At the same time, qualitative data obtained from interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed thematically. Key themes were identified, systematically organized, and presented below along with descriptive summaries.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure the credibility of the findings and the accuracy of the data, we rigorously assessed the study's reliability and validity. We evaluated the internal consistency of the questionnaires via Cronbach's alpha. Additionally, we conducted a pilot test at a public institution not included in the main sample to further refine the instrument. In the main study, the scale demonstrated high reliability across its input, process, and output dimensions, with all three constructs achieving Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.84.

Results

This section focuses on the interpretation and analysis of the results. The data were collected from various stakeholders, including all levels of management, academic staff, and student councils. Academic staff and department heads were surveyed via both closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires. A total of 360 surveys were distributed to academic staff, with 355 (98.6%) returned, and 120 were sent to department heads, of which 118 (98.3%) were returned. The data collected from academic staff and department heads were combined for easier presentation of the results. The quantitative data were analyzed via SPSS statistical software, and descriptive statistics, such as the means and standard deviations, as well as inferential statistics, such as regression analysis, were calculated. To enhance and complement the quantitative data, summarized qualitative information was collected from interviews and focus group discussions. On the basis of the information provided, this subsection analyzes the results from various participant perspectives.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Study Participants.

Variables	Categories	Academic staff	Department heads	College Dean	Internal quality enhancement directors	Academic vice presidents	Leaders of student councils
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Age	15-20						
	20-25						13 (32)
	25-30						27 (68)
	30-35	52 (15)					
	35-40	154 (43)	41 (35)	12 (40)	2 (20)	-	
	Above 40	149 (42)	77 (65)	18(60)	8 (80)	10 (100)	
Gender	Male	287 (81)	107 (91)	30 (100)	9 (90)	10 (100)	34 (85)
	Female	68 (19)	11 (9)	-	1 (10)	-	6 (15)
Education Level							
	students						40 (100)
	MA/M.Sc	211 (59)			4 (40)		
	PhD	72 (20)	71 (60)	16 (53)	6 (60)	10 (100)	
	Associate Professor	32 (9)	25 (22)	8 (27)			
	Professor	31 (9)	22 (19)	6 (20)			
	Others	9 (3)					

Table 1 shows that a total of 355 academic staff members completed the questionnaire. The responses were divided into three age groups: 15% between 35 and 40 years old, 43% between 36 and 40 years old, and 42% above 40. Among the students surveyed, 32% were aged 20--25 years, and 68% were aged 26--30 years. Additionally, some respondents are aged 35–40 years and over 40 years. In terms of gender distribution, there are more males than females, with females comprising less than 20% of the respondents. The educational qualifications of the academic staff are as follows: 59% have a master's degree (MA/MSc), 20% have a doctoral degree (PhD), 9% are associate professors, another 9% are full professors, and 3% fall into other categories. The remaining respondents' educational levels, excluding student council members, include PhDs, associate professors, and full professors. The participant pool includes a diverse range of stakeholders, from academic staff and students to top-level university administrators, ensuring a comprehensive view of the quality assurance landscape.

Demographic Profile of the Study Participants

Chart 1 offers a clear and comprehensive overview of the 573 participants involved in the study, detailing their roles, age distribution, gender, and highest level of education. The lines indicate the percentage of each function within the age groups. Gender lines (shown in contrasting colours, such as red and green) represent the proportion of men and women in each role. The

education level line (in purple) displays the percentage of participants holding a PhD. The "Student" category for education level is only applicable to student councils (100%). For other roles, the chart shows the percentage of individuals with a PhD as their highest degree. "Others" (3% of academic staff) are omitted for clarity. IQE stands for internal quality enhancement.

Chart 1. Detailed Breakdown of Input-Related Challenges.
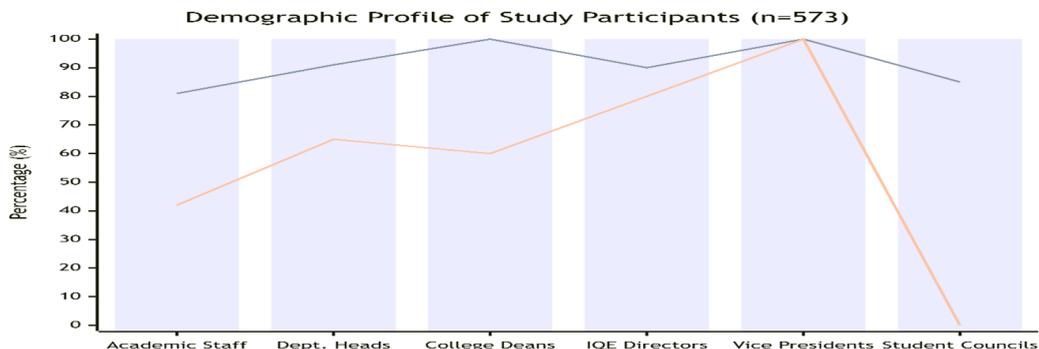

Demographic Profile of Study Participants (n=573)

Table 2. Ratings of QA Effectiveness Across the Input, Process, and Outcome Dimensions.

How effective are the inputs, processes, and outcomes of quality assurance practices at your university?		N	Mean	St. Dev.	Strongly disagree N (%)	Disagree N (%)	Moderate N (%)	Agree N (%)	Strongly agree N (%)
Input	Availability of efficient resources, funds, physical facilities, and infrastructures	473	1.52	0.50	227 (48)	246 (52)			
	Availability & quality of qualified academic staff	473	1.6	0.68	222 (47)	208 (44)	10 (2)	19 (4)	14 (3)
	Knowledge, skill, attitude & commitment of staff and management	473	1.4	0.63	293 (62)	146 (31)	10 (2)	14 (3)	10 (2)
	Prepared context-based policy, standard, structure, and strategy	473	1.45	0.63	317 (67)	118 (25)	10 (2)	14 (3)	14 (3)
	Average		1.5	0.6	265 (56)	178 (38)	10 (2)	10 (2)	10 (2)
Process	Continuous and regular ETA monitoring, evaluation, and feedback system	473	1.33	0.47	316 (67)	128 (27)	5 (1)	14 (3)	10 (2)
	Regular curriculum design and review mechanism	473	1.4	0.495	269 (57)	179 (38)	10 (2)	10 (2)	5 (1)
	Effective staff development strategies (training & reward)	473	1.5	0.5	208 (44)	231 (49)	10 (2)	14 (3)	10 (2)
	Effective teaching, learning, & assessment strategies	473	1.6	0.66	227 (48)	231 (49)	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)
	Average		1.46	0.53	254 (54)	194 (41)	10 (2)	10 (2)	5 (1)
Outcome	The attainment of desirable knowledge, skills, and attitudes, or competencies of graduates	473	1.3	0.44	345 (73)	113 (24)	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)
	Employability of graduates	473	1.2	0.42	359 (76)	99 (21)	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)
	Average		1.25	0.43	350 (74)	108 (23)	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)

Inputs: Among the 473 respondents (355 academic staff and 118 department heads), none agreed that sufficient resources, financial support, facilities, and infrastructure were available; 48% (n=227) strongly disagreed, whereas 52% (n=246) disagreed. This overwhelming consensus is reflected in a mean rating of 1.52 (SD = 0.508). The findings indicate a critical deficit in the physical and financial infrastructure essential for effective teaching and learning within public universities.

This quantitative assessment was corroborated by interviews with internal quality enhancement directors, who identified insufficient facilities and resources as a primary barrier to educational quality. They reported widespread shortages of basic teaching materials, adequate classrooms, laboratory equipment, and support services. As one director (D_5) stated,

> *"The government should provide sufficient grants to meet the increasing demand for additional instructional resources, equipment, and facilities. Currently, public universities lack proper infrastructure, including adequate classrooms, libraries, laboratories, internet connectivity, physical facilities, lecture rooms, sports equipment, etc."*

This scarcity of resources constitutes a significant constraint on the public university system, directly impeding progress toward the educational targets of SDG 4.7 and Agenda 2063, particularly in digital, green, and skills-oriented education. Furthermore, it signifies a breakdown in the Quadruple Helix model, specifically concerning public investment. Addressing this systemic challenge requires a strategic shift from temporary solutions to a comprehensive, long-term approach that aligns national priorities with global objectives and fosters robust multisectoral partnerships.

As indicated in Table 2, the availability and quality of the qualified academic staff received a notably low average score of 1.6 (SD = 0.60). The survey data further elucidate this result, with an overwhelming 91% of respondents expressing disagreement (47% strongly disagreed, 44% disagreed). These findings reveal a critical deficiency in both the quantity and caliber of academic personnel at the targeted universities. This shortage has a profound, detrimental impact on the quality of instruction and, consequently, student learning outcomes. Therefore, the public universities in the study area face persistent challenges stemming from an insufficient supply of adequately qualified academic staff. A survey of key informants revealed profound concerns regarding the competencies and attitudes of university staff and management toward quality assurance (QA). The assessment yielded a starkly negative consensus: an overwhelming 93% of the respondents expressed disapproval, with 62% strongly disagreeing that personnel possess the necessary attributes for effective QA. This sentiment is quantified by a mean score of 1.4 on the assessment scale (SD = 0.63), confirming a critical competency deficit. The findings identify insufficient knowledge, skills, and commitment as the principal barriers to quality enhancement. These conclusions were corroborated by an internal quality director (E_5), who attributed the core challenges in QA to

> *"A lack of knowledge, skills, commitment, and willingness, compounded by inadequate support, experience, and training. The director further critiqued prevailing awareness strategies for prioritizing extrinsic qualities instead of fostering intrinsic qualities or developing a strong quality culture."*

These human capital deficiencies have consequences that extend far beyond internal processes. They directly impede the capacity of universities to contribute to global development agendas (e.g., SDG 4.7, Agenda 2063), adapt to emerging transitions (such as green, digital, and skills-based shifts), and participate effectively in modern innovation ecosystems (e.g., the quadruple helix). Consequently, internal shortcomings in staff and management competencies are identified as critical bottlenecks, not only to institutional quality but also to the achievement of broader educational and developmental objectives. A significant majority of the respondents indicated a pronounced lack of context-based quality assurance frameworks within their institutions. The data

reveal a strong consensus, with 67% strongly disagreeing and 25% disagreeing with the existence of such policies, standards, structures, and strategies (M=1.45, SD=0.8). This statistical evidence underscores a fundamental systemic challenge: the absence of internal quality assurance mechanisms that are contextually tailored to the unique characteristics and needs of individual universities. This finding was substantiated by qualitative data, in which College Dean D2 elaborated,

> *"Ethiopian public universities struggle with inadequate quality assurance mechanisms because they lack context-specific internal quality assurance policies, procedures, structures, and standards. These guidelines should take into account the unique characteristics of each university, identify potential areas for improvement, address risk factors, and incorporate recognized best practices."*

Bar Graph Illustrating Input-Related Challenges: This stacked bar chart provides a detailed breakdown of the "Input" category, emphasizing the specific components where resource gaps are most significant. It is widely acknowledged that there is a severe lack of basic resources and funding, as indicated by a very high level of disagreement among respondents. Additionally, significant gaps in staff competence and context-based policies are evident, with over 90% of respondents disagreeing with these issues.

Chart 2. Detailed Breakdown of Input-Related Challenges.
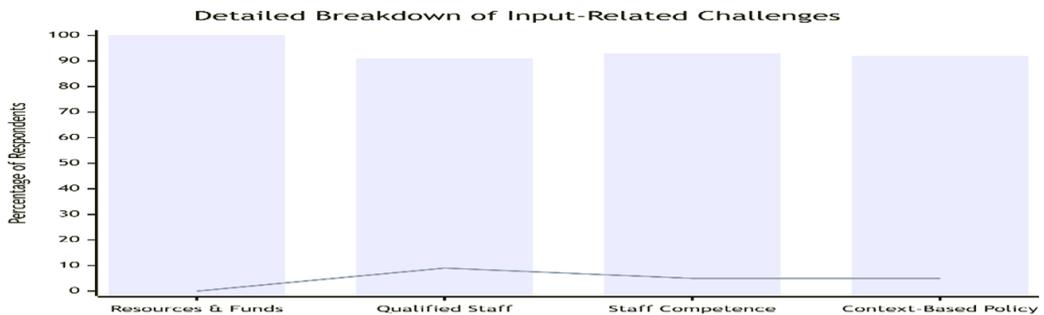
Survey data from public universities reveal a systemic failure in the foundational pillars of effective quality assurance (QA). This is evidenced by a striking 94% of stakeholders, both academic staff and management, expressing dissatisfaction with essential resources, reflected in an average score of merely 1.5 (SD = 0.6). This overwhelming consensus points to a critically compromised QA environment attributable to three interconnected deficiencies: first, inadequate institutional resources, including shortages in physical infrastructure, funding, and academic staffing; second, a lack of structural support, manifesting as insufficient commitment, willingness, and collaboration from institutional leadership; and finally, insufficient human capital, characterized by critical deficits in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective QA implementation. Collectively, these shortcomings signify a fundamental breakdown of the QA support system. This breakdown not only undermines institutional efficacy but also obstructs the alignment of Ethiopian higher education with national development objectives, global frameworks such as SDG 4.7 and Agenda 2063, and the demands of contemporary global transitions. Consequently, the findings underscore an urgent need for profound structural and cultural reforms to establish a viable QA framework.

Processes: Table 2 summarizes the mean scores from the evaluation, tracking, and assessment (ETA) system monitoring and feedback data. The results reveal a strong consensus about the system's ineffectiveness, with 67% of the respondents strongly disagreeing and 27% disagreeing with its efficacy. This negative perception is further emphasized by the low mean score of 1.33 (SD = 0.47). Overall, these findings suggest that the ETA framework is unsuitable for the university academic environment and has not met quality assurance objectives. In support of these findings, the interview data also reflect dissatisfaction. An internal quality enhancement director (E_4) stated that

> *The ETA system is "cumbersome and lacks sufficient resources" for public universities. The director criticized the system for primarily focusing on private institutions and for not having effective, continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms for the public sector. They described the system as inflexible and lacking innovative, practical approaches. This assessment underscores the urgent need for improved resources and staffing.*

As detailed in Table 2 (Item 6), the processes for curriculum improvement and evaluation within the existing quality assurance framework were met with significant disapproval. A combined 95% of the respondents expressed criticism, with 57% strongly disagreeing and 38% disagreeing with the current approach. This sentiment is quantitatively reinforced by key informant feedback, which assigns the curriculum design and review system a mean rating of 1.49 (SD = 0.495). These findings collectively underscore systemic deficiencies in how public universities design, evaluate, and revise their academic programs. This inadequacy is particularly problematic in an information-based economy, where education must cultivate student engagement, problem-solving abilities, collaborative capacity, and adaptability to drive innovation. Consequently, curricula must be aligned with these contemporary learning paradigms and integrate global perspectives to adequately prepare graduates for the workforce. Reflecting on this disconnect, College Dean C_9 identified a core issue:

> *Many Ethiopian public universities lack the institutional capacity for meaningful curriculum revision. Furthermore, the evaluation process frequently omits substantive input from key university and industry stakeholders. This lack of engagement, the dean noted, results in curricula that produce graduates who are unskilled and unmarketable, ultimately contributing to high unemployment rates.*

The fundamental conclusion is that the curriculum quality assurance process in these institutions is not fit for purpose. It operates as a bureaucratic formality rather than a genuine instrument for enhancing educational relevance and rigor. The critical flaw, the lack of engaged participation from industry and other stakeholders, ensures that curricula remain abstract and theoretical, failing to evolve into the practical, market-oriented programs required for student and national success.

Item 7 of Table 2 presents the staff development strategies implemented in target institutions for quality assurance practices. A total of 44% of the participants strongly disagreed with the issues raised, whereas 49% simply disagreed. The item has a standard deviation of 0.5 and a mean value of 1.5. These statistics highlight significant challenges related to staff development initiatives at Ethiopian public universities. It must develop fundamental competencies among its staff in areas such as teaching, research, consulting, and community engagement. According to an interview with the college dean, C_3,

Public universities in Ethiopia face considerable challenges regarding staff development techniques that support effective quality assurance practices. There are insufficient policies regarding appointment procedures, an inadequate staff appraisal system, and a lack of development strategies and activities. To maximize staff performance, it is essential to improve remuneration and working conditions. Additionally, motivation and reward systems should be regularly adjusted to better meet staff needs. Currently, many staff members express dissatisfaction with the existing motivation and reward strategies, which negatively affect quality assurance practices and the overall quality of education.

This analysis should be framed within broader contexts, such as the digital and skills-based transitions of SDG 4.7 and Agenda 2063. Adopting a quadruple helix perspective is crucial to reconceptualizing these staff development challenges, positioning them as a critical lever for enhancing school-to-work transitions and achieving systemic educational innovation. As indicated in Table 2 (item 8), a near-universal consensus of respondents expressed significant dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of teaching, learning, and assessment strategies in public universities, with 48% strongly disagreeing and 49% disagreeing (mean=1.6, SD=0.66). This overwhelming disagreement points to systemic challenges in implementing a student-centered educational model. These challenges are twofold, encompassing both foundational resources and core pedagogical practices. Interviews with university administrators, such as Academic Vice President A_5,

Reveal significant infrastructural and structural impediments, including a lack of adequate facilities, insufficient funding, large class sizes, and issues with curriculum and pedagogy. These issues concern the quality of incoming students and the qualifications, experience, and morale of the teaching staff, which collectively hinder the adoption of active learning methodologies.

Furthermore, focus group discussions with students highlight critical deficiencies in assessment systems. As reported by student S_7,

There is a failure to modernize the lecturer corps and a reliance on flawed assessment practices. These include the pervasive use of norm-referenced grading, a lack of effective moderation, and an overreliance on summative, end-of-semester examinations at the expense of formative feedback. This combination erodes grading consistency and fundamentally compromises the principles of fairness, transparency, and the developmental goals of student-centered learning.

In essence, public universities are confronted with a dual crisis: a struggle to secure the necessary resources for a modern educational foundation while simultaneously failing to implement sound, equitable assessment practices. This directly undermines quality assurance objectives and results in the widespread dissatisfaction captured by the survey data.

Bar Graph of Process-Related Challenges: This chart provides a detailed breakdown of the "Process" category, highlighting the specific operational areas where Quality Assurance (QA) practices are falling short. The external monitoring system (ETA) and the curriculum review mechanism are considered the least effective processes. Teaching and assessment strategies, although still inadequate, are perceived as slightly better in comparison.

Chart 3. Detailed Breakdown Bar Graph of Process-Related Challenges.

Detailed Breakdown of Process-Related Challenges
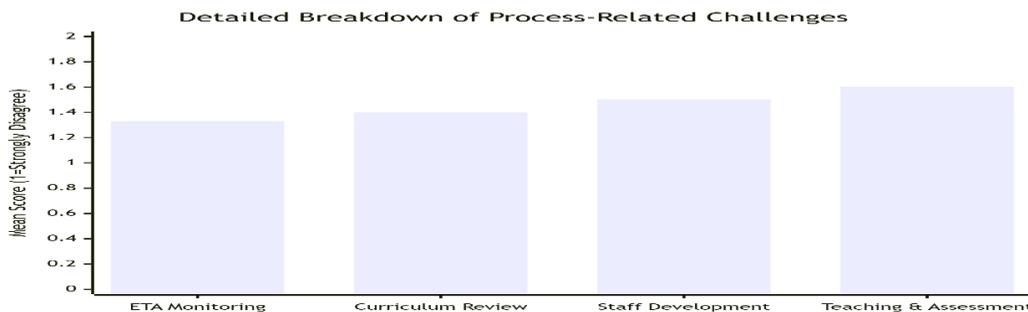
Public universities are currently facing several challenges, especially regarding the effectiveness of their quality assurance (QA) processes. A recent study revealed that 95% of respondents expressed doubts about the efficacy of these processes, with a mean score of 1.46 (SD = 0.53), indicating significant systemic failure. These challenges stem from both external and internal factors. Externally, the monitoring and feedback system managed by the Education and Training Authority (ETA) is often perceived as cumbersome, inflexible, and underresourced. This approach fails to provide the continuous support and strategic guidance necessary for meaningful improvement. Internally, the mechanisms for curriculum design and review are fundamentally flawed. Bureaucratic inertia and a lack of meaningful engagement with key stakeholders, particularly industry representatives, hinder these processes. As a result, there is considerable misalignment with labor market demands, leaving graduates inadequately prepared for the workforce. Moreover, this disconnect is worsened by insufficient staff development and an overreliance on traditional, teacher-centered instructional methods that prioritize summative assessments over student-centered learning. Overall, these deficiencies in QA processes create systemic barriers to educational quality, directly impeding universities' ability to fulfill their core mission and achieve global development objectives, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 and Agenda 2063.

Outcomes: The evaluation of competency attainment among graduates of public universities revealed significant deficiencies. As shown in Table 2 (Item 9), which outlines essential skills and attitudes for quality assurance, a large majority of the respondents had negative perceptions: 73% strongly disagreed, and 24% disagreed that graduates possessed these competencies. This is reflected in a mean score of 1.3 (SD = 0.44), which, according to the descriptive analysis, corresponds to a "very poor" rating. Qualitative data from interviews with college deans at Institution C_3 support these findings.

> *The main reasons for this shortfall include inadequate internship opportunities and ineffective teaching methodologies. To address these gaps, the findings suggest that universities should prioritize strategic interventions in curriculum design, work-integrated learning, robust career support services, deeper employer engagement, and data-driven decision-making to align graduate outcomes more effectively with labor market expectations.*

Table 2, item 10, illustrates the employment status of graduates, revealing that 76% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement regarding job prospects, whereas 21% disagreed. The mean value is 1.2, with a standard deviation of 0.42. These results suggest that graduates

from public universities face challenges in securing employment that aligns with their skills and qualifications. In an interview, the internal quality enhancement director, respondent E_9, stated:

> *"The primary issues faced by graduates include a lack of employment opportunities due to inadequate technical skills, limited subject-specific knowledge, insufficient practical abilities relevant to their fields, and a deficiency in the attributes necessary for success in their chosen careers. These challenges hinder their ability to contribute meaningfully to the workforce and society."*

The analysis concludes that graduates lack the necessary competencies and face poor employment outcomes. It recommends a shift toward improved curriculum design, work-integrated learning, and data-driven decision-making. Substantial revisions that integrate these quality assurance challenges within global development frameworks (e.g., SDG 4.7, Agenda 2063), emerging transitions (e.g., green, digital, skills-based, school-to-work), and ecosystem perspectives (e.g., quadruple helix) would enhance the manuscript, moving it beyond descriptive findings to make a stronger, more innovative contribution.

An agreement among stakeholders reveals significant failures in the outcomes of quality assurance practices: The doughnut chart in Figure 4 clearly illustrates a strong consensus regarding the inadequacy of educational outcomes. A remarkable 97% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that graduates possess the necessary skills and employability. This result underscores the evident shortcomings in educational achievements.

Chart 4. Stakeholder Consensus on Outcomes.
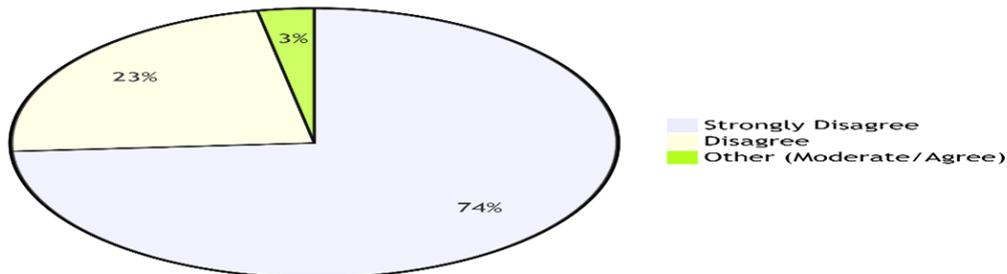
This study concludes that it investigated participants' perceptions of the influence of outputs and outcomes on quality assurance (QA) practices within their universities. The findings revealed a strong consensus against the efficacy of outcome variables in achieving QA goals: 74% of respondents strongly disagreed, and 23% disagreed with the statement. This is reflected in a low mean score of 1.25 (SD = 0.43) on the corresponding scale. The respondents attributed this inefficacy to several observable impediments, including inadequate graduate competencies, a lack of requisite knowledge and attitudes among graduates, and insufficient postgraduate employment opportunities. The analysis of these descriptive results is supplemented in the following section by inferential statistical findings.

The regression analysis examined the predictive relationships between key quality assurance (QA) dimensions, inputs, processes, and outcomes and the overall effectiveness of QA practices in Ethiopian public universities. This analysis tested the hypothesis that deficiencies in

these dimensions significantly undermine QA systems, impeding their capacity to support global educational transitions and developmental agendas.

Table 3. Model Summary for the Regression Model.

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.984	.968	.968	.12101

The R-squared value of 0.968 indicates that these input, process, and outcome-related factors account for 96.8% of the variance in quality assurance practices. The remaining variance can be attributed to other factors affecting quality assurance. This study investigates the associations between independent factors (inputs and processes) and the dependent variable (quality assurance). The ordinary error of approximation is 0.12, suggesting a relatively small value that indicates a high level of accuracy. In contrast, a larger standard error would suggest lower accuracy.

Table 4. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the Regression Model.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	206.494	10	20.649	41	.000
1	Residual	6.766	462	.015		
	Total	213.260	472			

Table 4 shows the results of the ANOVA, which revealed a significant regression association with a p value of 0.000. This study proposes that the independent variables can effectively predict factors that influence quality assurance. Specifically, all of the independent factors (input, procedure, and outcome) have a statistically significant link to the dependent variable, effective quality assurance. In other words, these independent variables can reliably predict the dependent variable. Notably, this significance test evaluates whether the combination of independent variables consistently predicts the dependent variable when used together. Consequently, the p value was used to test the null hypothesis. P-values below the alpha level indicate statistical significance. The null hypothesis was rejected because the table's independent variables had p-values less than 0.05. This demonstrates that the findings are statistically significant. The results show that the independent factors strongly predict the dependent variable, as indicated by $F(10, 206.494) = 41$ and a p value < 0.05. Regression models are statistically significant predictors of dependent variables and explain the data well.

Discussions

This study identifies systemic challenges to quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities through the integrated lens of CIPP (context, input, process, and product) evaluation and Quadruple Helix (QH) models. The findings demonstrate that these challenges constitute fundamental barriers, not merely operational inefficiencies that impede national development goals; continental aspirations, such as Agenda 2063; and global commitments, such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7. Empirical data reveal critical deficiencies across all QA dimensions, directly undermining the capacity of universities to foster climate resilience for a green transition, modernizing learning infrastructures for a digital transition, and implement the skills-based approaches essential for graduate adaptability and employability. The analysis of input-related challenges reveals a critical deficit in the foundational resources required for a robust QA system, including inadequate

infrastructure, a shortage of skilled staff, limited training opportunities, insufficient funding, and a lack of context-specific policies. This scarcity of physical and human capital severely constrains the integration of digital tools, the implementation of sustainability initiatives, and the adoption of innovative pedagogies necessary for a competency-based curriculum. These findings align with Worku et al. (2024), who identified similar challenges of inadequate infrastructure and funding, compounded by a lack of staff skills and commitment. Earlier research by Abebe (2015) and Kashaya (2012) further affirms that deficiencies in human, material, and financial resources impede the institutionalization of quality education, negatively affecting internal QA execution. Consequently, these input deficiencies represent a systemic failure to provide the foundational support needed to align Ethiopian higher education with the synergistic investment envisioned by the Quadruple Helix model and the targets of global development agendas.

Process-related findings illustrate a system struggling with implementation and pedagogical relevance. Key issues include ineffective internal quality enhancement structures, weak curriculum design and review processes, challenges in staff development and motivation, and a reliance on traditional assessment mechanisms. Compounding these internal weaknesses, the external quality assurance system is often perceived as inefficient, underresourced, and lacking innovative practices; it tends to focus more on private institutions and fails to provide robust, continuous monitoring and feedback for public universities (Dory, 2019). These process failures are particularly detrimental to the skills-based approach and the school-to-work transition. As Tamirat (2022) emphasized, effective QA requires coherent monitoring systems, staff motivation, and improved teaching methodologies. The current misalignment with these principles creates a significant gap between academic training and the competencies required for economic integration and sustainable development.

The convergence of input and process challenges manifests in deficient outcomes, most critically in terms of graduate quality and employability. An inflexible curriculum and minimal stakeholder engagement inevitably produce graduates who are ill prepared for labor market demands (Anonymous, 2025). Consequently, many lack the necessary technical, transferable, and personal skills for employment, a gap exacerbated by limited internship opportunities and ineffective instructional methods. Regression analysis confirms that the input and process variables are paramount determinants of these outcomes. This misalignment highlights a critical breakdown in the school-to-work transition, a core area where QA must demonstrate efficacy. As Asiyai (2015) contends, university graduates should be well educated, employable, and productive individuals who contribute to national development. The current outcome gaps indicate that the QA system is failing this mandate, thereby undermining progress toward SDG 4 and Agenda 2063, both of which hinge on a skilled and adaptable workforce.

The challenges identified in Ethiopia are not unique and bear instructive similarities to those in other developing regions. Public universities in Southeast Asia and Latin America, for instance, have also grappled with rapid expansion outpacing resource allocation, leading to strained infrastructure and faculty shortages (Worku, 2024). A common thread across these contexts is the struggle to move beyond centralized, input-focused QA models toward more dynamic systems that emphasize learning outcomes, stakeholder engagement, and curriculum relevance (Olivares, 2025). According to Olivares (2025), international experience suggests that strategic policy adaptation, such as fostering stronger industry–academia linkages for curriculum cocreation, as envisioned in the Quadruple Helix model, and investing in digital competencies, could offer valuable pathways for reforming Ethiopia's QA ecosystem. This comparative perspective underscores that while the challenges are systemic, strategic interventions informed by global precedents are feasible.

Ultimately, this discussion situates the empirical findings within the integrated CIPP and Quadruple Helix theoretical framework. The CIPP model provides a structural diagnosis, revealing critical failures in context (misalignment with global transitions), input (resource scarcity), process (weak implementation), and product (poor graduate outcomes). Simultaneously, the Quadruple Helix model illuminates collaborative failure at the heart of these issues: the lack of synergistic interaction between academia, the government, industry, and civil society. This theoretical integration demonstrates that the challenges are interconnected, stemming from a system that is neither internally coherent nor externally responsive. Therefore, rectifying QA in Ethiopian public universities necessitates a dual strategy: strengthening internal structures and processes through the CIPP lens while actively building the collaborative networks advocated by the Quadruple Helix to ensure that education is relevant, resilient, and aligned with the pressing demands of the 21st century.

Conclusion

This study investigated the systemic challenges impeding quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities. The findings reveal that these institutions confront significant, multifaceted obstacles across the educational spectrum. Critical deficiencies in inputs include inadequate infrastructure and funding; a shortage of qualified academic staff; insufficient commitment and collaboration between staff and management; and deficits in the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes for effective QA. This study contributes to the field by providing empirical evidence on these systemic barriers, underscoring the necessity for context-specific policy reform and institutional capacity building. Furthermore, profound process-related issues hinder QA implementation, characterized by a lack of continuous monitoring and evaluation, ineffective organizational structures, deficient curriculum design and review mechanisms, insufficient staff development and motivation strategies, and inadequate teaching and assessment practices. Ultimately, these failures in inputs and processes converge to produce deficient outcomes, most notably low graduate competencies, a lack of desirable skills and knowledge, and limited graduate employability. Regression analysis substantiates that these input, process, and outcome variables are paramount determinants of QA effectiveness, collectively explaining a significant portion of its variance. The study concludes that these systemic barriers fundamentally constrain the capacity of Ethiopian universities to contribute to green and digital transitions, adopt effective skill-based pedagogies, and facilitate a successful school-to-work transition for graduates. Consequently, the current state of QA directly undermines progress toward SDG 4.7 and Agenda 2063, which depend on a skilled, adaptable, and innovative citizenry. The identified challenges collectively represent a critical impediment to aligning Ethiopian higher education with national development goals, continental aspirations, and global commitments.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The challenges facing quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian public universities are significant obstacles not only to national development but also to achieving global and continental aspirations. Systemic shortcomings in inputs, processes, and outcomes directly hinder progress toward Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7, which emphasizes education for sustainable development, as does the African Union's Agenda 2063, which envisions prosperous Africa built on transformative education. Bridging this gap requires a fundamental reorientation of QA to align with these frameworks and to incorporate contemporary global transitions. To address these challenges, we propose three targeted strategies for policymakers and university leaders. First, QA models

should be modernized by incorporating clear indicators for green literacy, digital competencies, and skills-based pedagogies into accreditation standards. This will ensure that curricula foster critical thinking, adaptability, and awareness of sustainability, in line with the demands of green and digital transitions. Second, strengthening collaboration among universities, industry, and society through formalized frameworks is essential. Actively involving industry and civil society in the codesign of curricula, work-integrated learning, and program evaluation will help address the school-to-work transition crisis and improve graduate employability. Finally, a strategic effort is needed to align all QA mechanisms with the specific targets of SDG 4.7 and Agenda 2063. This alignment will ensure the international importance of Ethiopian higher education and position its QA system as a proactive driver of developmental goals rather than merely a reactive compliance exercise. Adopting an integrated ecosystem perspective, similar to the Quadruple Helix model, is crucial for establishing resilient, relevant, and high-quality higher education.

Practical implications for enhancing quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopia's higher education include the need for strategic adaptations to meet 21st-century competencies and the establishment of a national QA benchmarking system aligned with global standards, as per SDG 4.7 and Agenda 2063. Innovative financing mechanisms, such as the Differentiated University Development Fund, are being created to address the infrastructure needs of newer universities while utilizing a formula-based resource allocation focused on skills-based and digital pedagogy. Additionally, a National Quality Assurance Benchmarking System is being developed to address systemic challenges, emphasizing sustainable development and labor market readiness. University leaders are developing collaborations with Industry Partnership Incubators (UILs) to improve practical learning and relevance via the Quadruple Helix Approach, which brings together academics, industry, and civil society. These initiatives aim to improve Ethiopia's socioeconomic development by constructing a responsive and high-quality higher education environment supported by capacity-building activities and significant teacher participation in QA procedures.

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Classroom Level Factors that Enhance Students' Academic Achievement: The Case of Selected Ethiopian Public Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed classroom factors that enhance students' academic achievement in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools. To this end, the average results of three consecutive years of matriculation results were used to purposefully choose 30 public secondary schools (top 10, middle 10, and lower 10 achievers). A total of 300 randomly selected teachers who answered questionnaires with five Likert scales were chosen. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively using Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Based on a descriptive analysis, it was found that 87.5%, 91.25%, and 89.25% of teacher respondents, respectively, reported that having high expectations for their students' achievement, curriculum quality, and monitoring learning progress were the main classroom factors used to raise students' academic achievement. In a similar vein, 81.75% and 85.75% of teacher respondents, respectively, responded that using time on task and learning on task properly improves students' achievement. Based on the results, the researcher advises Ethiopian policymakers and curriculum designers to regularly train secondary school teachers in order to change their mindset in having high expectations from their students' achievement, monitor learner progress, and use time and learning on task so as to increase students' academic achievement.

KEYWORDS: academic achievement, classroom, public schools, Ethiopian education system

Introduction

At the grassroots level, classroom-level factors play a crucial role in enhancing students' academic performance (Kyriakides, 2007). Scholars held varying perspectives regarding classroom-level variables that improve students' academic performance, and they couldn't agree on what fosters students' academic accomplishment. For instance, Trujillo (2013) provided an explanation of classroom-level factors that improve students' achievement based on an analysis of over 50 research studies. These variables include criteria-centered curricula, effective leadership, ongoing student progress assessment, and teacher professional development. Moreover, Firdissa (2008) and Abebe (2012) reported that quality curriculum preparation, effective classroom assessment, proper classroom management, and teachers' subject matter know-how in structuring lessons greatly affect the academic achievement of students. Gilbert (2007) and Şişman (2011), in Australia, Canada, and America, compared more and fewer classroom-level factors that enhance students' academic achievement and reported that variables such as a participative approach to leadership, giving responsibility to students for their learning, and parental involvement in children's learning are the main classroom-level variables to enhance students' academic achievement. As a result, varying researchers interpret and continue to argue classroom-level practices that enhance students' academic progress.

Although classroom-level factors that enhance students' academic achievement were explained differently by different scholars, for the purpose of this article, classroom factors that enhance students' academic achievement are directly related to teachers' high expectations of students' achievement, curriculum quality, monitoring students' progress, time on task, and learning on task. In addition, in this article, academic achievement is explained in terms of students'

achievement in the national examination on core subjects, such as English and mathematics, on a longitudinal basis (three years). This is due to the fact that in Ethiopia, in most cases, students' academic achievement is measured based on results obtained from national examinations (MOE, 2009). In the Ethiopian context various researches have been conducted and identified various classroom-level variables that enhance and inhibit students' academic achievement at secondary schools. For instance, Firdissa (2008) and Workneh & Tassew (2013) conducted research on Ethiopian secondary schools' curriculum and found that most prepared curriculum materials at Ethiopian secondary schools failed to be representative in terms of gender balancing, with most prepared curriculum materials being male-dominated. In addition, researchers in the area of students' academic achievement have reported that the most important factor to increase educational quality is to improve learners' performance (Ayalew, 2009; Derebssa, 2013). Although various efforts have been made to enhance students' academic achievement in Ethiopia, the quality of education remains unimproved (Derebssa, 2013). For instance, Firdissa (2008) and UNESCO (2010) identified aspects such as the poor conditions of buildings, crowded classrooms, and low recreational facilities that contributed to a poor student's academic achievement.

The cumulative effects of the above educational problems, such as poor curriculum preparation, inappropriate classroom assessment, poor classroom management, and teachers' poor subject matter know-how, were revealed in the 12th- and 10th-grade national examinations during the years 2017/2018 and 2018/19 (MOE, 2012). For example, in the 2017/2018 school year, from the total number of students who took the national examination in the 10th and 12th grades, 61% of students in the 10th grade and 67% of students in the 12th grade scored below 50% in mathematics and English (MOE, 2010). In 2018/19, almost half of the learners who took the national examination in the 12th grade failed to score at least 50% in mathematics and English, and to this end, the government offered students who had scored less than 50% in the national examination access to the university (MOE, 2018).

These results indicate that poor educational quality is found in many Ethiopian secondary schools, with many secondary school students failing to achieve at least an average mark for core subjects in the national examination. As a teacher, I have ample experience in teaching mathematics at secondary schools and in teaching pedagogical courses at teacher education colleges and universities. Although classroom-related factors exert a dominant effect on student achievement, most classroom-related variables (the place where the actual teaching-learning process takes place) have received little attention from Ethiopian educational expertise. I have observed that different stakeholders, from the ministry to the school level, devote much of their time to preparing and explaining educational policies, roles expected of regional and zone educational officials, and school rules and regulations; little attention is being given to classroom levels, with little supervision of actual classroom situations. In general, they have failed to supervise teachers to identify whether or not they are using the right teaching methodology and appropriate evaluation strategies and evaluating the quality of curriculum materials. Hence, it seems this article is needed; thus, this study assessed classroom factors that enhance students' academic achievement in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools and raised the following leading question: *What classroom factors enhance students' academic achievement in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools?*

Conceptual Framework

In order to investigate classroom-level factors in enhancing students' academic achievement, different educators proposed different models. For example, according to Creemers and Kyriakides (2008), the most prominently known models that help to determine classroom-related factors in enhancing students' academic achievement can be studied using four major models. The first model is Carroll's (1989) model Carroll's (1989) model, which is comprised of five essential elements, equated mastery learning with the proportion of the time the learner spends on a given activity to the total amount of time the students need to complete a given task (Nguyen, Warren & Fehring, 2014). The five elements include aptitude, ability to understand instruction, perseverance, opportunity to learn, and quality of instruction. The second model is the Creemers' (1994) effective model. Creemers (1994) developed a model that emphasizes the role of the classroom and teachers as the major variable for improving the quality of instruction (Guldemond & Bosker, 2009). Creemers (1994), in his model, further presented curriculum, grouping procedures, and teacher behavior as the three major determinant factors in improving the quality of instruction (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009). The third model is the Scheerens (2000) model. Scheerens (2000) developed an integrated multi-level model by reviewing various instructional and classroom-level factors that enhance students' academic achievement, largely focusing on input (human or material variables) as the major determinant of student achievement (Scheerens, 2004).

The model was fundamentally designed for teacher effectiveness research to explain the association between hypothetical effective-enhancing situations and measures of output, in most cases calculated in terms of student academic achievement (Creemers, 2005). The model considers school as a black box, with the main objective of showing the influence of input attributes on output or to 'break open' the black box to show which process or throughput factors 'work,' as well as the impact of contextual conditions (Beare, 2007; Scheerens, 2000). The fourth model is the Shavelson, McDonnell, and Oakes (1989) model. The Shavelson, McDonnell, and Oakes Model (1989) are broader, incorporating the above-mentioned model and helping policymakers identify education-related problems and the kind of intervention taken to minimize the problems. This model assumes that student achievement is directly related to instructional quality and student background (Beare, 2007). The instructional quality can in turn be influenced by the school, curriculum, and instructional quality by working conditions, including class size, classroom resources, occupational support, and school-wide standards (Feng, 2007). The curriculum quality can influence instructional quality and thus give students the opportunity to learn. However, teaching quality and instructional quality can be affected by teacher qualifications and general patterns of teaching practice (Guldemond & Bosker, 2009).

The conceptual model for this article was developed based on the Creemers and the Scheerens models. The two models were emphasized due to the fact that using only one model cannot indicate all the factors that enhance students' academic achievement. As a result, the two models were considered as the base, and the researcher developed the following conceptual framework in order to pinpoint the different factors that enhance students' academic achievement at Ethiopian secondary schools.

Figure 1. Proposed Model.
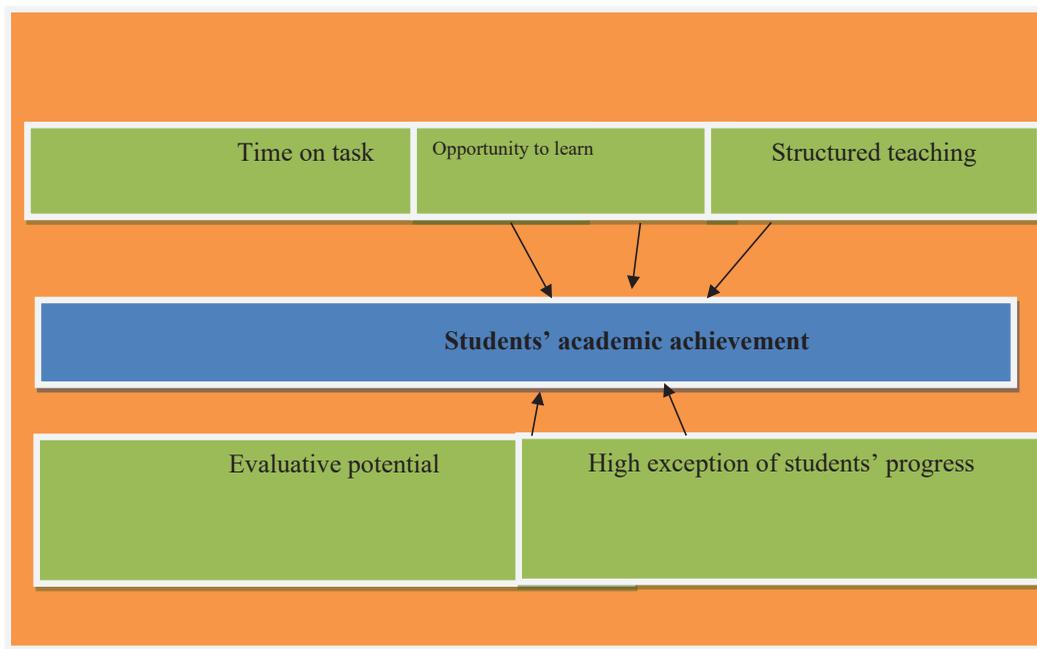
The proposed model was similar to that of the Creemers model in that, in both cases, emphasis was given to classroom-level factors in determining student achievement. It is also the belief of the researcher that the classroom is the place where the actual teaching and learning process occurs, and as a result, it determines student achievement to a large extent. In addition, the proposed model, like that of Creemers, tries to investigate classroom-level factors that enhance student achievement in terms of time, opportunity, and quality at the context, school, and student levels. The article also considered Scheerens' proposal of classroom factors such as curriculum quality, high expectation of pupil progress, degree of evaluation and monitoring, structured teaching, time as independent variables. In general, the proposed conceptual framework considered the two frameworks and included high expectations of students, curriculum quality, monitoring learning progress, time on task, and learning on task as an independent variable and students' academic achievement as the dependent variable and is described as follows:

High expectations of students' progress: Schools' and teachers' high expectations of student progress involve not only strictly emphasizing student academic achievement in core subjects but also the proper usage of assessment results for the improvement of student academic results (Scheerens, 2016; Teddlie & Stringfield, 2011). Similarly, high expectations on student progress involve placing 'attainment' on the agenda of staff meetings and engaging in discussions with individual teachers (Muijis et al., 2013). It also involves employing achievement pressure as a criterion when recruiting new teaching staff and implementing resources (Scheerens, 2016). In addition, it involves knowing the behavioral change that the students are expected to exhibit, the ability to set larger expectations that the students can achieve, and the proper usage of student records on their progress (Teddlie & Stringfield, 2011). Creemers and Kyriakides (2008) suggest that high expectations of student achievement are more important when compared to low expectations,

as those teachers with high expectations believe in active participation and increased learning time. In contrast, teachers with low expectations of student achievement use much of the instructional time and consider students as passive recipients of information (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008). The overall concept of fostering high expectations involves clear policy selection, beliefs, behaviors, and structural facilities (Muijs et al., 2013). In general, Beare (2007) and Scheerens (2016) view high expectations of student progress as incorporating such variables as focusing on the mastery of core subjects, high expectations (school level and teacher level), and records on student performance.

Curriculum quality: Curriculum can be defined as what teachers are teaching in the classroom and what the students are expected to learn in the classroom (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). Carefully prepared curriculum materials that indicate the behavioral change expected of the student play a profound role in acting as a strong bridge in coordinating the different efforts made towards improving student achievement (Muijis et al., 2013).

On another aspect, the shortcoming of prepared curriculum materials is balanced by the experience of teachers' professional autonomy (Scheerens, 2016). According to Scheerens (2016), curriculum quality involves variables such as the mechanism by which curricular priorities are set, selection of teaching materials and methods, implementation of methods and textbooks, opportunity to learn and satisfaction with the curriculum.

Monitoring of Learning progress: The concept of 'evaluation potential' indicates teacher's capability in using assessment results as the basis to inform student learning and feedback at all levels for improving the existing learning difficulties. It involves the priority teachers give to assessment and monitoring (Beare, 2007; Scheerens, 2016) It also deals with the way evaluation technology is used; for example, standardized pupil monitoring systems or computerized test service systems and the use of evaluation results and records at the school level (Guldemond & Bosker, 2009). According to Scheerens (2016), evaluation potential involves such elements as focusing on student assessment, monitoring and keeping records on student improvement, school-based assessment, use of evaluation results, and satisfaction with assessment activities.

Learning on task: One aspect of pupils' academic success is learning on task. The course material was meticulously broken down into learning assignments and arranged in order. Teachers asked questions on a frequent basis to make sure the students understood the subject. Students were also given plenty of time to practice what they had learned and received feedback. Beare (2007). Suggested that one aspect of students' academic success is learning on task, which requires students to attentively study scientific books, reconsider and reflect on the material, and purposefully find connections to existing knowledge or work on what is presented.

Time on task: Time on task, or learning time, is explained in terms of the degree to which students are exposed to the learning practices and experiences (Scheerens, 2016). For example, learning time can be described as the discrepancy between the 'planned time' (for example, the time per subject matter area in the timetable) and 'implemented time' (Beare, 2007). Therefore, learning time can easily be assessed as the way teachers value effective learning time, the way teachers monitor student absenteeism, the way teachers manage their classroom (avoiding and minimizing ineffective 'time consumers'), and the amount of time the students spend practicing their homework (Scheerens, 2016).

Materials and Methods
Research Design and Participants

In order to investigate classroom-level factors that enhance students' academic achievement, in this article a descriptive survey design was employed. Ten secondary schools comprising top, middle, and lower achiever levels were the subject of the study. As a result, six regional states and one chartered city in Ethiopia that housed the aforementioned levels secondary schools (high, medium, and lower achieving) were chosen as study participants. Thus, all 431 English and math instructors working for the Addis Ababa City Administration as well as the regional states of Oromia, Amhara, Sidama, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples, Gambella, and Somalia participated in the survey. They were selected to show how teachers in higher-, medium-, and lower-achieving secondary schools perceive classroom-level factors that enhance students' academic achievement.

Sample Size Determination and Sampling Procedure

In order to select sample representatives from Ethiopian public secondary schools, both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used. In non-probability sampling or in using the purposive sampling technique, first the average results of three consecutive years of secondary school students' achievement on the national examination in core subjects (English and Mathematics) were calculated, and then secondary schools were ranked based on their average achievements from highest to lowest. Following a ranking of the secondary schools from higher- to lower-achieving secondary schools, the top ten, or upper-achieving; middle ten, or medium-achieving; and bottom ten, or lower-achieving, public secondary schools were then identified and selected using a purposive sample technique. This was intentionally done in order to select equal proportions of secondary schools from all levels to obtain the necessary information from all levels. Accordingly, 30 secondary schools (10 from each of the upper, medium and lower achieving schools) were purposively selected. As mentioned above, the total number of teachers teaching in these 30 secondary schools comprises 431 teachers. Using these 431 teachers as a population of the study, the sample size was determined by using yemanes' formula as follows (Yemane, 1967): $n = N/1+N\ (e^2)$ Where, N is the population size and e is the level of precision. Hence, taking, N =431 and assuming 95% confidence level at p =0.05, the sample size was calculated and found to be 208. In order to increase the validity of the research, a total of 300 teachers were selected as the sample. Following the determination of the sample size, the stratified sampling procedure was employed to choose all participating teachers from each level (high, medium, and less effective). Equal numbers of samples at each level were chosen using the stratified sampling procedure. As a result, 300 secondary school teachers (144 English and 156 mathematics teachers), comprising 104 secondary school teachers from upper-achieving schools (52 English and 52 mathematics teachers), 100 secondary school teachers (45 English and 55 mathematics teachers) from the middle-effective schools, and 96 secondary school teachers (47 English and 49 mathematics teachers) from less effective schools, were selected.

Table 1. Distribution of Secondary School English and Mathematics Teachers Selected for the Study.

LEVELS	# of English teachers	# of Maths teachers	Total population	Sample of English teachers	Sample of maths teachers	Total sample selected
Upper achieving schools	75	75	150	52	52	104
Medium achieving schools	65	80	145	45	55	100
Lower achieving schools	66	70	136	47	49	96
Total	206	225	431	144	156	300

Reliability, Validity and Ethical Issues

In this article, the issue of reliability was addressed by conducting a pilot study so that the reliability index was identified using Holist's (1996) formula. In this article, the calculated reliability index was 85% and falls within the acceptability range of the reliability index. In relation to the validity issue, in order to check validity, the instrument was prepared in advance and given to the advisor and three other different professionals (M.A. holders) from different professions for review and critique. Individuals selected for this purpose provided comments on language construction, language appropriateness, and the effectiveness of the material to measure what it is supposed to measure. In addition, the researcher used the existing literature to develop the questionnaire and check whether the instrument met the golden standards. Lastly, pertinent to the ethical issue, in this article ethical considerations were given due attention in that participants were treated with respect. Consent was required from participants who agreed to take part in the research process voluntarily. Participants were informed of the researcher's desire, and all relevant information was conveyed. Furthermore, the researcher tried to ensure that no physical or psychological harm was done to anyone who participated in the study.

Results

In order to provide an answer for the research question "What classroom factors enhance students' academic achievement in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools?" Five different key variables that are directly associated with factors that enhance students' academic achievement were assessed. These five key variables include *high expectations, curriculum quality, monitoring learning progress, learning on task, and time on task.* Teacher respondents were made to rate the prepared items using a scale of 1-5 where, 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. All items were set to elicit ideas directly related to the dimensions of school enhancing factors. The mean score of each of the samples for all of the indicators was compared with the total mean score (*M*=3.0). The total scores for each category were calculated by summing responses for all items. A one-sample t-test, comparing each total categorical mean score to the mean score (*M*=3) from a hypothetical categorical normal distribution, was conducted for each of the categories. As a result, each dimension comprising high expectations, curriculum and

monitoring learning progress, learning on task and time on task, were assessed and are presented in the subsequent sections.

Dimension 1-High expectations at school level: The extent to which teachers have high expectations of student achievement plays an important role in enhancing learners' academic achievement. An assessment was conducted to assess whether high expectations at the school level impact learners' academic achievements.

Table 2. High Expectations as the Dimension of Students' Academic Achievement.

	Items	Lower Achieving		Medium Achieving		Upper Achieving		Average		
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1	Placing learner attainment on the agenda of staff meetings	3.15	1.23	3.23	0.95	3.86	0.97	3.42	1.05	.000
2	Holding talks between the school head and individual staff about learners' achievement	3.45	0.9	3.51	1	3.82	0.92	3.59	0.94	.000
3	Using achievement pressure as a criterion when recruiting new teaching staff	3.3	0.99	3.34	1.17	3.82	0.92	3.49	1.03	.000
Total		3.3	1.04	3.36	1.04	3.84	0.93	3.5	1.01	

As portrayed in Table 4.13, teacher respondents strongly agreed to all components of high expectations (*M=3.50, SD=1.01*). This suggests high expectations at the school level are a factor that could enhance students' academic achievement in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools. Teachers teaching at the upper-achieving public secondary schools showed a high degree of agreement at a mean score (*M=3.84, SD=0.93*) in all the components of high expectations at the school level when compared to the lower-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.30, SD=1.04*). This indicates that high expectations of student achievement are best practiced by the upper-achieving public secondary schools and thus enabled them to score better matriculation results. Each component of the high expectation dimension was analyzed in detail. As can be seen from Table 2, it is evident that teachers who are teaching at the selected Ethiopian public secondary schools agreed on the importance of placing learner attainment on the agenda of staff meetings as a dimension of high expectation to enhance learners' academic achievement (*M=3.42, SD=1.05*). Teachers who are teaching at the upper achiever public secondary schools showed a higher degree of agreement at a mean value (*M=3.86, SD=0.97*) when compared to the lower achiever public secondary schools (*M=3.15, SD=1.23*). From this data, therefore, we may understand that the discussion that the upper-achieving public secondary schools are having with their staff members better helped them to enhance the academic achievement of learners.

An analysis was conducted to assess whether school heads and teachers individually consult to discuss learner achievement and school improvement. The results showed that teachers agreed that they meet with their school heads to discuss learners with the aim of enhancing student academic achievement (*M=3.59, SD=0.94*). The maximum mean value in relation to making consultations

with school heads and individual teachers was observed from the upper-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.82, SD=0.92*), and the minimum mean value was observed from the lower-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.45, SD=0.90*). This result may reveal that school heads consulting with individual teachers is one dimension of high expectation and is better practiced in higher-achieving public secondary schools, which enabled them to gain better matriculation results. The other crucial variable associated with high expectations at the school level is the degree to which achievement pressure is used as a criterion when recruiting new teaching staff. As presented in Table 2, teacher respondents agreed that it is important to use achievement pressure as a criterion when recruiting new teaching staff (*M=3.49, SD=1.03*). The maximum mean value towards this component was shown by the higher-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.82, SD=0.92*) when compared with the lower-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.30, SD=0.99*). This may indicate that upper achieving public secondary schools used achievement pressure as a recruiting criterion as the main dimension of high academic expectation and ensured that newly recruited teaching staff would assist in motivating learners to achieve good matriculation results. In addition, when the three indicators of structured teaching were compared to the mean score (*M*=3.0) from a hypothetical normal distribution, the one-sample t-test results indicated the differences between the normal distribution and sample mean scores for all of the indicator items were statistically significant at $p < .05$, at (t=0.000 at 2-tailed).

Dimension 2-Curriculum quality: Curriculum quality needs to be maintained in order to enhance learners' academic achievement. The results show a mean value and standard deviation (*M = 3.65, SD = 1.00*), which confirmed that curriculum quality is maintained in order to enhance learners' academic achievement in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools.

Table 3. *Curriculum Quality as a Dimension of Students' Academic Achievement.*

S/N	Items	Lower Achieving		Medium Achieving		Upper Achieving		Average		
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1	Contents are clearly sequenced based on their importance	3.15	1.23	3.47	1.13	3.92	1.02	3.58	1.04	.000
2	There are clearly stated learning objectives.	3.45	0.9	3.6	1.18	4.14	0.94	3.83	1.04	.000
3	Content and objectives are aligned	3.3	0.99	3.59	1	3.76	0.86	3.78	0.96	.000
4	Co-curricular activities are offered for learners	3.3	3.12	3.19	0.94	3.19	0.89	3.42	0.94	.000
	Total	3.3	1.04	3.46	1.06	3.98	0.93	3.65	1	

Teacher respondents were asked whether contents in textbooks were clearly sequenced based on their importance. Table 3 revealed that contents in textbooks are sequenced based on their importance (*M=3.58, SD=1.04*). As the data confirms, the mean value exhibited by the upper-achieving public secondary schools is higher (*M=3.92, SD=1.02*) and lower for the lower-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.15, SD=1.23*). One can deduce that the sequences of content may be perceived better by the higher-achieving schools. The existence of clearly stated objectives as a mechanism to enhance learners' academic achievement was also assessed. The results indicated that objectives were clearly stated in the textbook (*M=3.83; SD=1.04*). The maximum mean value pertinent to this variable is portrayed by the higher-achieving public secondary schools (*M=4.14; SD=0.94*), and the minimum mean value was obtained from the lower-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.45; SD=0.90*). Respondents agreed that the alignment of content and objectives and provision of co-curricular activities are dimensions of curriculum at average mean values of *M=3.78, SD=0.96* and *M=3.42, SD=0.94*, respectively. The analyzed data also revealed that those teachers teaching at higher-achieving public secondary schools exhibited a higher mean value (*M=3.76, SD=0.89*) when compared to the lower-achieving public secondary schools (*M=3.30, SD=3.12*). From the above analysis, it appears that higher mean values obtained from the upper-achieving public secondary schools for the variables indicated in Table 3 indicated that content sequence, alignment of objectives, and the provision of co-curricular activities enabled the enhancement of learners' academic achievement. In addition, when the four indicators of curriculum quality are compared to the mean score (*M=3.0*) from a hypothetical normal distribution, the one-sample t-test results indicated the differences between the normal distribution and sample mean scores for all of the indicator items were statistically significant at $p < .05$, at t=0.000 at 2-tailed. Dimension 3: Monitoring learning progress. Monitoring the learning process is vital to ensuring that learners are motivated and supported to achieve well. The results from the analysis of variables are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Monitoring Learning Progress as a Dimension of Students' Academic Achievement.

S/N	Items	Lower Achieving		Medium Achieving		Upper Achieving		Average		
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1	Learners receive regular feedback about what they need to do or improve.	3.32	1.2	3.03	1.27	.3.52	1.1	3.29	1.19	0.00
2	Learners receive extra help when they need it.	3.55	0.92	3.24	1.24	3.89	1	3.56	1.06	0.00
3	Teachers modify their instructional practices based on classroom assessment.	3.88	0.96	3.76	1.02	4	0.83	3.88	0.93	0.00
	Total	3.58	0.98	3.34	1.17	3.79	0.79	3.57	1.06	

The mean values for variables such as *learners receive regular feedback about what they need to do or improve (M= .29; SD=1.19), learners receive extra help when they need it (M=3.56; SD=1.06),* and *teachers modify their instructional practices based on classroom assessment (M=3.88; SD=0.93)* exceeded the average mean value (3), then we can say that all the variables as a dimension of learning progress were evident at the selected Ethiopian public secondary

schools. Therefore, the data showed that teachers at public secondary schools not only ensure that learners receive regular feedback and extra help, but teachers are also encouraged to modify their instructional practices based on classroom assessment. In all cases the data showed that the upper-achieving public secondary schools received maximum mean values ($M=3.79, SD=0.79$), indicating that they enabled better learners' achievement in the matriculation examination. In addition, when the indicators of monitoring learning progress were compared to the mean score ($M = 3.0$) from a hypothetical normal distribution, the one-sample t-test results indicated the differences between the normal distribution and sample mean scores for all of the indicator items were statistically significant at $p < .05$, at t = 0.000 (2-tailed).

  Dimension 4-Learning on task as a dimension of students' academic achievement: Learning on task is seen as a dimension of students' academic achievement. The results from the analysis of variables are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Learning on Task as a Dimension of Students' Academic Achievement.

S/N	Items	Lower Achieving		Medium Achieving		Upper Achieving		Average		
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1	The course material to be taught is carefully divided into learning tasks and placed in sequence	3.63	1	3.36	1.12	4.15	0.81	3.71	0.98	0.00
2	Teachers regularly ask questions to understand whether the learners have understood the learned material.	3.96	0.79	3.69	1.13	4.04	0.87	3.9	0.93	0.00
3	Learners are given ample time to practise what they have been taught and they are given with feedback	3.43	1.05	3.23	1.12	3.79	1.07	3.48	1.08	0.00
	Total	3.67	0.94	3.43	1.12	3.99	0.91	3.43	1.12	

  The calculated mean values of all the components of learning tasks were found to exceed the average mean value of 3. The results showed that respondents strongly agree that *"the course material to be taught is carefully divided into learning tasks and placed in sequence" (M=3.71; SD=0.98), "teachers regularly ask questions to understand whether the learners have understood the learned material" (M=3.90; SD=0.93), "Learners are given ample time to practice what they have been taught, and they are given feedback" (M=3.48; SD=1.09).* In all cases, the upper-achieving public secondary schools recorded a large mean value *(M=3.99, SD=0.91)*, indicating that all the variables, such as the *course material to be taught, are carefully divided into learning tasks and placed in sequence; teachers regularly ask questions to understand whether the learners understood the learned material; they are given ample time to practice what they have been taught;* and *they are given feedback*, showing a positive response from the respondents. In addition, when the indicators of learning tasks were compared to the mean score ($M = 3.0$) from a hypothetical normal distribution, the one-sample t-test results indicated the differences between the normal

distribution and sample mean scores for all of the indicator items were statistically significant at *p* < .05, at t = 0.000.

Dimension 5-Time on task as a dimension of students' academic achievement: Time on task can be defined as the degree to which learners are spending their time practicing different activities or learning tasks. Based on this notion, the results on learning tasks revealed that the respondents agreed that learners are spending their time practicing different activities or learning tasks at an average mean value of M=3.27, SD=1.14.

Table 6. Time on Task as a Dimension of Students' Academic Achievement.

S/N	Items	Lower Achieving		Medium Achieving		Upper Achieving		Average		
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1	Teachers monitor school attendance so that learners do not miss class	3.64	0.93	3.32	1.14	3.68	1.15	3.55	1.07	0.00
2	There are adequate instructional materials per student	3.3	0.97	3.02	1.09	3.69	1.18	3.34	1.08	0.00
3	Teacher-student ratio is manageable for all subjects	2.74	1.29	2.64	1.21	3.43	1.3	2.94	1.27	0.00
Total		3.23	1.07	2.99	1.15	3.6	1.21	3.27	1.14	0.00

Respondents showed agreement in their responses towards time on task, such as *"teachers monitor school attendance so that learners don't miss class" (M=3.55; S=1.07)* and *"there are adequate instructional materials per student" (M=3.34; SD=1.08)*, as being a dimension of school effectiveness. Table 6 revealed that the higher-achieving public secondary schools showed a maximum mean value towards the implementation of time on task *(M=3.60, SD=1.21)* when compared to the lower-achieving public secondary schools *(M=2.99, SD=1.15)*. However, teacher respondents disagreed that *"teacher-student ratio is manageable for all subjects" (M=2.94; SD=0.93)*. From this result, it seems that the ability to manage teacher-student ratio appears to be difficult. In addition, when the indicators of time on task were compared to the mean score (*M* = 3.0) from a hypothetical normal distribution, the one-sample t-test results indicated the differences between the normal distribution and sample mean scores for all of the indicator items were statistically significant at *p* < .05, at (t = 0.000 at 2-tailed).

Discussion

Five key variables, which include high expectations, curriculum quality, monitoring learning progress, learning on task, and time on task, were identified to answer the research question (What classroom factors enhance students' academic achievement in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools?), and each of the variables are discussed as follows.

Expectations at School Level

Placing learner attainment on the agenda of staff meetings, consulting with school heads and individual teachers for school improvement and using achievement pressures as a criterion when recruiting new teaching staff members were implemented in selected Ethiopian secondary to

enhance students' academic achievement. In all cases, teachers teaching at the upper achiever public secondary schools showed a high degree of agreement in relation to these practices indicating that this performance enabled them to achieve better matriculation results. This finding is supported by Creemers and Kyriakides' (2008) view in those high expectations of student' achievement is more important when compared to low expectations particularly as active participation of students through a learner-centred methodology and increased the learning time motivates students. In contrast, teachers with low expectations of student achievement use much of the instructional time in teacher-centred methods and consider students as passive recipients of information (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008). In this article finding do have broader implications at the global or policy level. According to Gershenson and Papageorge (2018), teachers' high standards for their pupils are essential for promoting student achievement and tackling global concerns, which influences policymakers. In addition to influencing students' perceptions and academic achievement, these expectations can also influence broader conversations about educational policy (Murphy, Fryberg, Canning, Brady, and Hecht; 2021)

Curriculum Quality

The availability of curriculum quality in terms of clearly sequenced content based on importance, clearly stated objectives, aligned objectives with contents and co-curricular activities as dimensions of curriculum quality were confirmed and found to be higher among the upper achieving public secondary schools. These practices among the upper achieving schools were attributed as enabling factors for scoring better matriculation results. This finding is consistent with the views of Muijis, Chapmen, & Armstrong, (2013) that carefully prepared curriculum materials that clearly indicate the behavioural change expected of the student plays a profound role in acting as strong bridge in coordinating the different efforts made towards improving learner achievement. The article's findings do have wider global or policy-level ramifications in that Lavonen (2020) claimed that high-quality curricula can encourage active and informed global citizenship by improving students' knowledge and comprehension of global issues, cultivating a sense of personal identity related to global issues, and inform policymakers to give curriculum-related issues the attention they deserve.

Monitoring Learning Progress

According to Scheerens (2016), evaluation potential involves such an element as focusing on student assessment, monitoring and keeping records on student improvement, school-based assessment, use of evaluation results and satisfaction with assessment activities. Teachers in this study effectively monitored students' learning progress, regularly provided feedback for their students to know what they need to do or where improve, provided extra help for their students when needed, and modified their instructional practices based on classroom assessment. In all cases, the data upper achieving schools received maximum mean values indicating that it enabled them to get better matriculation results. This finding is supported of Guldemond and Beare(2007) view that monitoring learning progress deals with the way evaluation technology is used in standardised pupil monitoring systems or computerised "test service systems" and the usage of evaluation results and records at the school level.

Learning on Task

Learning on task is one of the dimensions of students' academic achievement. Course material was carefully divided into learning tasks and placed in sequence, teachers regularly asked questions to establish whether the learners understood the learned material, learners were given ample time to practise what they have been taught and they were given feedback. In all cases, upper achieving schools received larger mean values, indicating all that all variables were practised by the upper achieving schools and benefited them with better matriculation results. This finding is consistent with (Beare, 2007). who proposed that learning on task is one dimension of students' academic achievement and makes learners carefully read scientific texts, rethink and reflect on content, and deliberately connect to prior knowledge or work on given assignments and as a result, it improves academic achievement. Sstudents" academic accomplishment is linked to learning tasks (Godwin & Fisher, 2018). Pupils who actively apply higher-order thinking abilities routinely perform better than those who don't. To improve student performance, policies should support learning-on-task strategies like cognitive-activation teaching (Godwin & Fisher, 2018).

Time on Task

Time on task is vital in ensuring teaching and learning. Apart from teachers monitoring school attendance so that learners do not miss class, and there are adequate instructional materials per student, teachers ensure that learners spent their time practicing different activities or learning tasks. In all cases, upper achieving secondary schools showed a maximum mean value towards the implementation of the above-mentioned activities when compared to the lower achieving schools. Time on task or learning time is explained in terms of the degree to which students are exposed to the learning practices and experiences (Scheerens, 2016). Learning time can be described as the gap that exists in between the planed time for example. The time given per subject matter area in the timetable and the implemented time in the teaching learning process (Beare, 2007). Teachers' practices in conducing continuous assessment and using positive reinforcement in the teaching learning process is a determinant for the teaching-learning processes (Morohunfola, 2015). In general, the overall academic achievement of students is determined by teacher's effectiveness in using proper teaching methodology, assessment techniques and teaching methodology (Hattie, 2009).

Teachers' Proper Usage of Time at School Levels

The majority of teachers use their time effectively in selected Ethiopian public secondary schools and this is considered the best strategy to enhance students' academic achievement. With the regard to time usage, teacher respondents reported that the existence of school policy in relation to homework, pupil absenteeism, cancellation of lessons, maintaining of order in the schools were the best strategy in enhancing students' academic achievement and were exhibited more in upper achieving schools and which enabled them to achieve better matriculation results.

The level of teachers' time usage in teaching and students' academic performance is confirmed by the study of (Scheerens, 2016). The main factor that affects student academic achievement is the strength of teachers in managing and using their time effectively (Akinwonmi, 2006). Based on the results obtained from the analyzed data the following summaries were made:

It was determined that it is essential to track students' learning progress, provide them with regular feedback, offer the students with extra assistance, and adjust teaching methods in response to assessments in order to increase students' academic achievement.

It is crucial to consult school leaders and individual teachers for school improvement, use accomplishment pressures as a criterion for hiring new teaching staff, and include learner attainment on staff meeting agendas.

It was confirmed that the quality of the curriculum, as measured by how well the materials are arranged according to priority, how well the objectives of the curriculum are aligned, and provision extracurricular activities for the students, promotes students' academic success.

Monitoring learning progress by providing regular feed-back and extra help for the students and modifying instruction found to play a paramount role in enhancing students' academic achievement.

Making students learn on task by: carefully dividing the course materials to be taught in learning tasks and sequence; asking question in order to know students' level of understanding; giving ample time for the students to practice the content they taught plays a pivotal role in improving students' achievement

Giving an attention for time one task is the other variable that enhances students' academic achievement. To this end teachers should: Monitor class attendance so that the students do not miss the class; Provide adequate instructional materials for the student; Place students in a class in a manner in which teacher-student ratio is manageable.

Conclusion

In this article by comparing the experience of the upper, medium, and lower achiever secondary schools and selecting the best experiences that enhances students' academic achievement the following recommendations are made. Ethiopian policymakers, and curriculum designers should maintain the quality of the curriculum, as measured by how well the materials are arranged according to priority, how well the objectives and contents of the curriculum are aligned, and by providing extracurricular activities for the students. When instructing secondary school teachers, Ethiopian teacher training institutions should emphasize and incorporate topics like time on task, learning on task, curriculum quality, and high expectations of students into their lessons. Secondary school directors and supervisors should consult school leaders and individual teachers for school improvement, use accomplishment pressures as a criterion for hiring new teaching staff, and include learner attainment on staff meeting agendas. Teachers should track students' learning progress, provide them with regular feedback, offer the students with extra assistance, and adjust teaching methods in response to assessments. In addition, teachers should make students learn on task and give due attention for time on task.

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