Public Higher Education Institutions' Potential Barriers in Producing Competent Graduates

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating public higher education institutions' potential barriers in producing competent graduates. It was a descriptive mixed research design which used a multistage stratified random sampling technique to select research samples for the study. The study included 320 academic staff and 800 students randomly selected from seven universities. Data collected using questionnaires and interview was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics for numerical data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. Results confirm that higher education institutions' instructional practices were found to be mainly narrowed to the tradition of imparting knowledge at the cost of developing graduates' competence to think critically, develop experiences and solve problems. Based on the findings, the research suggested practical and attainable recommendations that guide future actions, policies, or interventions concerning strategies those higher institutions of Ethiopia need to utilize in order to produce competent graduates.

Key words: Public, higher education, barriers, competent, graduates

1. Introduction

Institutions of higher education especially universities have three basic functions. These are education or training, scientific research and community service (Goetze, 2019). As an academic institution universities are dedicated to the pure pursuit of new specialized knowledge. But as Saong, Bonifacio & Gili (2023) noted the social changes that appear in the world have changed the role of the universities. In addition to education, scientific research and community service, they appear in achieving economic and social prosperity; and protection from social ill and social change. Their role may change to satisfy the new demands placed on them by a digitally enabled society in order to enable the society cope with the new social changes, Moscardini, Strachan

&Vlasova, (2020) supposed that universities could modify their role & setup a platform to respond to these evolving challenges. This could include designing new courses, forming new organizational structures and utilizing new pedagogical practices. This shows that universities are also significant foundations of the progressions of social change and development.

Universities need to be aware of that employers want '…graduates who can apply the knowledge, skills, and culture they acquire in college to solve problems as soon as they enter the workforce.' (Chen, Ghafoor & Impagliazzo, 2022, P. 56). Notably, universities are to arm graduates with the basic competencies that empower them to win the job-market and become productive on their earlier working days. Chen, Ghafoor and Impagliazzo make clear that the competencies graduates need to acquire include mastery of their subject area knowledge, skills and pedagogy, critical thinking, problem solving skills, teamwork and cooperation, interpersonal and communicative skills, actively responsive to societal needs, and self-control skills.

According to Suleiman, (2023), there are many challenges higher institutions face in maintaining quality such as "lack of standardization, ineffective teaching practices of faculty members, irrelevant staff qualifications, poor university infrastructure, outdated curriculum that does not match industry trends and technological advancements, inadequate funding and resources, poor graduate employability, ethical concerns for academia, and insufficient methods of assessing student learning outcomes" (P.29).Moreover, scholars argue that Ethiopian higher education institutions face various challenges when it comes to practicing effective educational strategies and developing the necessary skills among students. University students suffer from various challenges: medium of instruction, inability of using participatory teaching-learning approaches, dissatisfaction of current industry demands with graduated professional skills and knowledge, inability to transform their theoretical knowledge into practice, inability to access and use technology, insufficient professional development opportunities, unable to get adequate incentives and salary are some of the challenges of Ethiopian Higher learning institutions (Tefera & Wudu (2016; Kassa & Mulugeta, 2021).

Recent research hint that today's education institutions face various challenges when it comes to practicing effective educational strategies and developing the necessary skills among students (Assefa & Tadesse, 2018; Berhanmeskel & Fisseha, 2024). Practically, students suffer from

various challenges: medium of instruction, inability of using participatory teaching-learning approaches, dissatisfaction of current industry demands with graduated professional skills and knowledge, inability to transform their theoretical knowledge into practice, inability to access and use technology, insufficient professional development opportunities, unable to get adequate incentives and salary are some (Admasie & Nigussie, 2017).

The other significant challenge is the existence of mismatch between job requirements and the skills possessed by potential applicants (Berger &Kostal, 2019). This discrepancy can result from outdated or inadequate educational programs that do not adequately equip graduates with the practical skills needed for teaching positions. Employers often struggle to find candidates who possess relevant pedagogical knowledge, subject expertise, classroom management skills, and instructional strategies required for effective teaching. Hence, addressing these and other related potential challenges requires concerted efforts from institutional stakeholders and policymakers to ensure equitable and sustainable solutions that prioritize the quality of education and the advancement of the educational system.

Clearly, universities are to arm graduates with the basic competencies that empower them to win the job-market and become productive in the world of work. Chen, Ghafoor and Impagliazzo make clear that the competencies graduates need to acquire include mastery of their subject area knowledge, skills and pedagogy, critical thinking, problem solving skills, teamwork and cooperation, interpersonal and communicative skills, actively responsive to societal needs, and self-control skills. However, existing realities witness that universities are educating students to become academically competent in a given field of graduation or academic category. However, universities are not only expected to prepare their students to become academically fit to specific subject of study, they, rather, need to empower the graduates to solve job, life, social and environment related challenges (Taye, 1987; Saint, 2004;European Commission et al.,2018; Asalf, Maheshwari, & Yadav, 2023) .

A study by Subin et.al (2022), explored knowledge, skills, and abilities in providing pharmaceutical care, medication management, patient counseling, and other aspects of clinical practices aiming to pinpoint the strong point and weaknesses in clinical pharmacy practice. It also identified workload, resource constraints, regulatory issues, inter-professional collaboration,

and patient-related factors as challenges encountered by clinical pharmacists in their professional practice. The research evaluates the effectiveness of the curriculum in preparing graduates for clinical pharmacy practices emphasizing on the alignment between curriculum content and the demands of the healthcare system.

Krishantoro (2019) also conducted a study to examine the instructional strategies adopted by universities to align their curricula, and teaching methodologies, with the learning environments. This study emphasized integrating and evolving technology such as artificial intelligence; bid data scrutiny, and robotics into educational processes to acquaint graduates the mandatory competencies. The study addressed the role of graduates' competency development such as inventiveness, critical thinking, digital literacy and problem solving among graduates to thrive in the fourth industrial revolution. In sum, Krishantoro's study provides valuable insights into the evolving role played by universities in preparing learners for the challenges and opportunities presented by fourth industrial revolution. Likewise, Richardson and Kabanoff (2014), for example, highlight the importance of aligning educational outcomes with industry demands. This study and the others collectively stress the importance of creating a strong partnership between universities and industries to improve the skills, relevance and quality of graduate competence.

In light of those considerations, this study explored the challenges of higher education institutions in producing competent graduates, with a focus on the Ethiopian context. By examining the institutional challenges in producing competent graduates, this research provided valuable insights and recommendations for fostering competent graduates within higher education institutions and contributing to the development of a country. The basic question of this study was specified as what are the common difficulties that higher institutions of Ethiopia are facing in developing graduates' global competence? Based on this, the following research questions would be answered.

1. What are the potential barriers universities' faces in the process of producing competent graduates?
2. How do higher education universities try to overcome the barriers they face in the processing of producing competent graduates?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design and approach

This study aimed to explore the potential barriers higher education institutions of Ethiopia face to produce competent graduates. It employed pragmatic paradigm to serve as the framework for conducting this research on assessing the potential barriers of higher education institutions in producing competent graduates. This paradigm operates under the assumption that reality encompasses both subjective and objective elements. It recognizes that while individuals may have their own interpretations and experiences, there are also objective facts and practices that shape the reality of the issue (Creswell, 2013). By adopting the pragmatic paradigm, this research can generate evidence-based insights that inform the practices and policies of higher institutions in producing competent graduates. It allows for a balanced understanding of both subjective experiences and objective practices, contributing to a more holistic assessment of the role of higher education institution's practices and challenges in producing competent graduates.

The study was conducted using a descriptive research design. Implementing a descriptive research design helps to describe the phenomenon or situation regarding the population using both qualitative and quantitative data. Specifically, it helps to answer what and how questions related to the practices and challenges of higher education institutions in Ethiopia in producing competent graduates. It provides a detailed and accurate representation of the characteristics and actions of the higher institutions. This study was designed as a cross-sectional study, capturing data at a single point in time from multiple higher institutions. This helped in analyzing the current state of practice and challenges in producing competent graduates

2.2. Population Size and Sampling Technique

The study focused on all public higher education institutions in Ethiopia as its target population. It used a multistage stratified random sampling method with samples being randomly selected at each stage and stratum. To ensure the effectiveness of the research sample selection, several factors were considered. As known, Ethiopian higher education institutions are many in number and leveled into four categories: applied, specialty, comprehensive and research universities. To conduct this study; therefore, samples were intentionally drawn from each category based on the above four levels of Ethiopian institutions.

Thus, the sampling technique used was purposive sampling. Addis Abeba University, for example, has been selected purposefully due to the fact that it is a research university and due to its proximity for the researchers as well as because of its status as the first and oldest university in Ethiopia. Kotebe University of Education also has been selected purposefully due to the fact that it is the only Education University in the country. Adama Science and Technology University also has been selected due to the fact that its specialty in science and technology. Mekdela Amba and Debre Birhan Universities those containing large number of university communities were chosen from the applied universities category on the same perspective of data sampling selection technique. Selale University is selected from comprehensive universities due to its proximity for the researchers. The study involved 10% of faculties or colleges and students by using random sampling technique. In other words, 10% of the teachers and 10% of graduating class students were randomly selected to participate in the study. The study, thus, included a total of 320 academic staff and 800 3rd, 4th and 5th year students from the selected universities.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

To ensure robust data collection, this study aimed to employ multiple tools in order to triangulate the findings. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered using multiple methods to enhance the validity and reliability of the information collected, and intended to produce more credible conclusions. The data collection tools were developed based on insights obtained from the literature, conceptual framework, and also by adapting from other researchers, depending on the specific context. The data were collected from various respondents: educators, students, stakeholders, and higher education institution using questionnaires, interview and document review.

2.4. Methods of Data Analysis

Descriptive, inferential and thematic data analyses were employed by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. Data obtained through open-ended questionnaires and structured interview were analyzed qualitatively (esp. thematically), whereas data obtained through close-ended questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive inferential statistics including Mean, Standard deviation, Histogram, and by comparing calculated and expected mean, and one sample t-test to identify whether the strength and weakness or extent of manifestations founded was statistically significant.

Textual data from interviews and open-ended survey responses were utilized to identify recurring themes related to the practices and challenges of the institutions under study. A thematic analysis was conducted to derive meaning from the qualitative data, providing insights into the key factors influencing the effectiveness of these institutions in producing competent graduates.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

In this study, anonymity, privacy, and secrecy were a few ethical concerns which were respected during the study (Dowling, 2010). Due attention was given to the protection and well-being of participants as part of the principles of ethical considerations. The following issues were considered throughout the study: the gathered information was maintained with high confidentiality; care was given to minimize any potential harm to research participants, both during and after the study, and sources were acknowledged.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of Instructors Responses

I. Questionnaires

A. Quantitative Data obtained from Instructors on Potential barriers or Challenges

The first theme is challenges pertaining to instruction and academic support. This theme has included six items that inquire about the adequacy of academic advising provided for students, utilization of tutorial and academic services in the university, the consistency of using English language as it is a medium of instruction, the timely of giving feedback for students in the university, the condition of course coverage in different departments and the supportiveness of the administration in implementing innovative teaching practices. The descriptive analysis is displayed in table 1.

As it is shown in table 1 the number of respondents reacted to the items provided in instructors' questionnaire about the challenges pertaining to instruction and academic support is 324. The sum total of the data points given by those respondents is 1013.75. The calculated mean value of this data set is 3.13 with a mean difference of 0.13 from the expected mean value 3.00. Out of 324 respondents who give response for the items, answers of 66.70% respondents measure greater than or equal to the expected mean 3.00. Only the answers of 33.30% respondent

measure below the expected mean. This result shows that the accomplishment of the activities rose under instruction and academic support greater than expected value. Also instruction and academic support is not a challenge for the universities.

Table 1: descriptive statistics of themes of institutional Potential Challenges

Themes	N	Sum	Expectected Mean	Calculated Mean	≥ 3.00	< 3.00	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness
Challenges Pertaining to Instruction and Academic Support	324	1013.75	3.00	3.13	66.70%	33.30%	0.68	0.47	-1.07
Challenges Pertaining to Learning and Working Environment	324	861.50	3.00	2.66	38.30%	61.70%	0.85	0.83	0.22
Challenges Pertaining to Teaching Learning Resources and Facilities	324	929.40	3.00	2.87	46.90%	53.10%	0.78	0.61	0.21

The standard deviation of this themes' data set is 0.68. This value of standard deviation states that most of data is clustered compactly around the calculated mean in a different way from the normal distribution. The 0.47 variance value of this data set is low variance that infers the data points are closer to the calculated mean and to each other. So the amount of variation that exists among the data points is low. The -1.07 value of skewness shows the distribution of data that is not symmetric to the left and right sides of the calculated mean value. The bell curve of this data set is a right-skewed distribution that is longer on the right side of its peak than on its left. This means that most of the data is clustered above the expected mean near the calculated mean.

From this analysis one can conclude that the instruction and academic support taxonomy of the institutional challenges that has a manifestation above the expected value is not a challenge for the universities. Though there is a gap between the actualities of instruction and academic support and the presence required to attain complete achievement, appropriate instruction and academic support is offered in the universities. So it is difficult to conclude that the instruction academic support is a challenge for the universities.

In order to check if this conclusion is statistically significant or not one sample t-test analysis is worked out. The result of the analysis is presented in table 2. As it is shown in table 2, the finding is statistically significant. There is statistically significant difference between the expected mean and the calculated mean ($t = 3.40$, $df. = 323$, $p < 0.05$). The significance level of

the data of this classification is Sig=0.00, less than 0.05. So the calculated and the expected means are statistically significantly different. Cohen's d was calculated in order to know the strength of the difference. As it is shown in table 2 the result is d = 3.4. The effect size of 3.4 in a one sample t-test indicates a large effect. So the difference between the expected mean value and calculated mean value is large.

Table 2: one sample t-test of themes of institutional Potential Challenges

One-Sample Test

	standard error of mean	Test Value = 3						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Lower	95% Upper	Cohens' d
Challenges Pertaining to Instruction and AcademicSupport	.03790	3.400	323	.000	.12886	.0543	.2034	3.4
Challenges Pertaining to Learning and Working Environment	.05133	-6.645	323	.000	-.34105	-.4420	-.2401	-6.64
Challenges Pertaining to Teaching Learning Resources and Facilities	.04328	-3.038	323	.004	-.13148	-.2166	-.0463	-3.037856

The second theme of institutional challenges is challenges pertaining to learning and working environment. Factors of university learning and working environment rose under this theme are inquiring about the disability friendliness of university facilities, appropriateness of universities working environments, availability of sufficient sports center and facilities, accessibility of entertainment centers and obtainability of teaching resources in the universities. The result of descriptive analysis presented in table 1 indicates that the number of instructors responded to the items included under this theme is 324. Having calculated mean value of 2.66 and a mean difference of -0.34 from expected mean 3.00, the total sum values of the data points of this them is 861.50. The respondents who give answers that have measure greater than or equal to the calculated mean are 38.30%. And the measures of responses of 61.70% respondents are below the expected mean. This shows that the learning and working environment of the universities is a challenge for the universities in producing competent graduates.

The 0.85 standard deviation value of this data point shows that much amount of data is clustered below the expected mean near the calculated mean. The variance value of the data point of this theme is also 0.83, which supposes that the data points are closer to the calculated mean and to each other. The 0.22 skewness value of the learning and working environment of the universities also represents that the bell curve of this data set is a left-skewed distribution that is longer on the right side of its peak than on its left. This means that most of the data is clustered below the calculated mean on the left side of the expected mean.

In order to check whether this judgment is statistically significant or not, the data is analyzed using one sample t-test. As it is shown in Table 2 the result of the analysis confirms that the judgment is pronounced. The difference between the calculated and the expected means is statistically significant ($t = -6.64$, $df. = 323$, $p < 0.05$). The significance level of the data of this classification is Sig=0.00, less than 0.05. Cohen's d was calculated in order to know the strength of the difference. As it is displayed in table 2, the result is $d = 6.64$. The effect size of 6.64 in a one sample t-test indicates a large effect. So the difference between the expected mean value and calculated mean value is large. So, challenges related to learning and working environment is a potential challenge for the universities in producing competent graduates.

The third theme of instructional challenges is challenges pertaining to teaching learning resources and facilities. This theme examines about adequacy of internet and library services, provision of adequate laboratory facilities, attainment of equipping graduates with digital literacy, alignment of courses with industry standards and alignment of the curriculum with the needs of the job market in the University. As it is shown in table 1 the number of respondents who replied to the items included under this theme is 324. The sum total of this team's data point is 929.40. Having -0.13 mean difference from the expected mean 3.00, the value of calculated mean is 2.87. The measures of the answers of 46.9% respondents' are greater than or equal to the calculated mean 3.00. This means the measures of the answers of 53.1% respondents is less than the expected mean. This distribution of data shows that there a challenge of the availability of teaching learning resources and facilities in the universities.

One sample t-test is run to check whether this finding is statistically significant or not. As it is presented in table 2 the difference between the calculated and the expected means is statistically significant ($t = -3.038$, $df. = 323$, $p < 0.05$). The significance level of the data of this classification is Sig=0.004, less than 0.05. The calculated mean is statistically significantly less than the expected mean. In order to know the strength of the difference Cohen's d was calculated. As it is shown the table 2 the result is $d = -3.04$. The effect size of -3.04 in a one sample t-test indicates a large effect. So the difference between the expected mean value and calculated mean value is large. This leads to the conclusion that confirms the calculated value is less than the minimum expected value. So in instructors' view point the teaching learning resources and facilities is a challenge in the universities.

One sample t-test is calculated to examine whether this inference statistically significant or not. The result of one sample t-test analysis is presented in the following table.

Table 3: One sample t-test analysis of instructors' institutional challenges

One-Sample Test

	standard error of mean	Test Value = 3						Cohens' d
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Lower	95% Confidence Upper	
Instructors' Institutional Challenges	.03902	-2.937	323	.004	-.11458	-.1913	-.0378	-2.93666

As it is shown in table 3, the difference between the calculated and the expected means is statistically significant (t = 0.3902, df. = 323, p< 0.05).The significance level of the data of this classification is Sig=0.004, less than 0.05. So the calculated mean is statistically significantly less than the expected mean. The finding inferred from descriptive statistical analysis of data obtained from instructors' questionnaire and argues that universities are facing challenges in producing competent graduates is statistically proven. In order to know the strength of the difference between the calculated and expected means Cohen's d was calculated. According to Table 3, the result is d = -2.93666. The effect size of -2.93666 in a one sample t-test indicates a large effect. So the difference between the expected mean value and calculated mean value is large or strong. This deduces the conclusion that higher institutions of Ethiopia are facing challenges in producing competent citizens.

B. Qualitative Data analysis of Instructors on Institutional Potential Challenges

To investigate the challenges faced by higher education institutions in Ethiopia in the process of developing graduates in the context of global learning competence, instructors from the selected universities were interviewed. In short, the study aimed to investigate the challenges EHIs instructors faced in some selected Ethiopian universities throughout their journey in their efforts of developing graduates' global learning competence based on the following issues as follows.

Curriculum Related Challenges

A. Inadequate Content

One of a key challenge in the process of developing graduates' global learning competence is the inadequacy of curriculum content related to global issues and intercultural competencies. IR_2 pointed out that syllabi in various education colleges and departments fail to incorporate

important topics related to global and national citizenship, cross-cultural communication, and international engagement. Many programs lack a comprehensive curriculum that addresses global issues and intercultural competencies. $IR_{7,}$ for example, claimed that existing syllabi do not incorporate essential topics related to global citizenship and cross-cultural communication. In addition IR_9, explained the following**. "**In my understanding, the education stream is a key profession, however; some of the designed syllabus didn't contain adequate contents and topics. It was difficult for me to give the course due to scarcity of ideas and contents of the subject matter." Similarly IR_8 remarked that EHIs graduate students didn't bring the expected professional knowledge and language skills even though trainings have been given to them. These situations reflect that there are idea gaps on the education experts who prepared the educational curriculums in relation to the integration of curricula theories and into practices.

B. Integration of Educational Theories into Practices

While some efforts have been made to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical applications, there are inconsistencies in how these are implemented across programs. EHIs Instructors highlighted that collaboration with industry is not uniformly applied across fields, resulting in students receiving limited hands-on experience in areas relevant to global competence development. Institutions struggle to effectively integrate theoretical knowledge with practical applications that enhance global competence. While some universities have begun to develop modules that bridge this gap, the implementation is inconsistent.

Faculty Development Related Challenges

A. Inadequate Training: The other research question was focusing on the institutional mechanisms to improve students' skills and learning competencies. In educational colleges of EHIs graduating students often lack trainings those enable them to use appropriate educational teaching methodologies and are not adequately prepared to teach competencies required in an interconnected world. In relation to this point **IR_{13}** described the following points.

> In my experience, our institution focuses on a few usual practices; I don't think that these graduates can be competent as expected. These include practical internships especially in medicine and technology areas. However, we don't have general institutional arrangements to ensure our graduates possess the necessary skills and competencies. We don't have an academic culture like regular curriculum reviews, strong partnerships with legal practitioners, and mentorship programs that guide students through their academic journey.

From open ended instructors questionnaire respondents (IR_{14}) claimed that many faculty members lack training in contemporary teaching methodologies and global education strategies. This gap in professional development limits their ability to effectively teach and incorporate global learning competences into the curriculum. Instructors are also not sufficiently equipped to engage students in problem-solving and critical thinking exercises related to global contexts.

Thus, colleges and faculties in our universities are not on the standard of equipping university students including graduate classes with effective instructional process. They are not incorporating global learning competences into their curriculum those enable them to be competent globally. Moreover, there is limited or no collaborations between industry professionals with university instructors to enhance curriculum relevance. The overall collaboration between academia and industry remains insufficient, limiting students' exposure to global practices. There are limited and sometimes no formal partnerships or advisory boards that focus on integrating global skills into the educational institution frameworks.

B. Low Motivation and Morale:

With interviews of EHIs instructors, they were asked about what problems or challenges EHIs educators are facing in the instructional process. And then IR_{12} replied that "poor compensation and lack of recognition for faculty can lead EHIs instructors to low motivation, further diminishing the quality of education delivered." Similarly respondent IR11 claimed as follows.

> I have already mentioned that the challenges of instructors/ educators are related with incentives and salary. I can say that most instructors enjoy the freedom of working as instructor due to having free ample times, having no tough control of working hours. However, we are in a tough problems regarding to the salary and incentives. For example, our colleagues with the same profession and status who are working in NGOs and in some other few organizations are earning more than hundred thousand while we are earning about ten thousands. And hence, you can imagine the deference and how life is threatening us.

Higher education institutions in Ethiopia are struggling with lots of challenges in producing competent graduates. EHIs instructors are un happy for the salary and incentives as mentioned above. Also, there are challenges of instructional practices in general. These and other major challenges in our universities may bring ever -lasting problems in the quality of education in general and in the skill deficiencies of graduating class students in particular. Those challenges may cast complications on the education industry at national level which may not be solved for a very long time.

Language Proficiency Related Challenges

A. Weak Language skills

Most of the graduate class students have a problem of understanding and using of English language as a medium of instruction. For example, instructor respondent IR_{15} explained the following. "When I was giving them a translation course, they were unable to translate the given texts either into English or Amharic Language. At the end, I saw and realized that our university English language department students are weak in their language skills and knowledge as well as in their learning competences.*"*

EHIs struggle to effectively integrate theoretical knowledge with practical applications that enhance global competence. While some universities have begun to develop modules that bridge this gap, the implementation is inconsistent. A recurrent issue mentioned by interviewees, particularly from language departments, is the weak language proficiency of many students. This deficiency is especially prominent in the English language, limiting students' ability to access international academic resources, participate in global dialogues, and engage with diverse perspectives. Interviews highlighted that many students, particularly from certain colleges, demonstrate inadequate proficiency in English. This deficiency hinders their ability to engage with international literature and participate in global dialogues. Supporting these ideas, respondent IR_{16} replied: "the medium of instruction is English; moreover, these students are English major students from graduating class, and hence English language knowledge and skills deficiencies from English major graduating class students limited students' achievements."

B. English Language Training Related Challenges

Although some universities, including AAU, DBU, and the likes have established English Language Improvement Centers, their effectiveness is often compromised by a lack of resources and poorly organized training programs. As a result, students are not receiving the intensive language education needed to improve their global competence. In addition, their program effectiveness is often undermined by insufficient resources and training opportunities. Many institutions face a lack of adequate resources for practical training, including laboratories and technology. This limitation affects the ability to provide hands-on experiences essential for developing global competencies.

Resource Constraints

Financial and facility Limitations: EHIs are working in a serious finical funding and facilities problems. They often suffer from inadequate funding, restricting their ability to enhance educational infrastructure, access modern teaching tools, and develop comprehensive global competence programs and so on. The scarcity of funding was highlighted as a critical challenge not only for global competence programs, but also with compulsory materials.

These concepts imply that EHIs are not providing basic educational facility materials which can be used for the instructional process. Thus, it is possible to suggest that EHIs inability to supply facilitating educational materials as mentioned above would cast its impact on producing of competent and qualified graduate students.

Assessment and Evaluation Related Challenges

Inconsistent Assessment Methods:

EHIs graduating class students were not been assessed nationally. EHIs were having no both national and international assessment standards to be implemented. Their graduate class learning competence assessments were not standardized and consistent across their disciplines and programs in place to evaluate students' preparedness for working in both national and global contexts. This lack of uniformity makes it difficult to measure students' skills, learning and competencies related to national and global awareness. Supporting the above ideas instructor respondent (IR_6) described that there are no international assessment standards set for graduate class students thought it has been started lately at national level. He acknowledged that the existence of national standard assessment named exit exam which is given across universities and across disciplines at the same time is an appropriate package to evaluate university graduate students' knowledge and skills across similar discipline. He added that similar contexts needed to be implemented in order to evaluate graduate class students international knowledge and skills across disciplines and programs.

From the above discussions, it can be realized that EHIs are not implementing internationally standardized assessments those enable learners to be aware of themselves with new educational and technological innovations, except the newly started exit exam implementation program. Also there is a lack of robust feedback loops involving students, alumni, and industry stakeholders that

could inform curriculum revisions and improve global competence development. As stated above, EHIs lack formal structures for collecting feedback that could guide curriculum revisions and ensure that programs to be aligned with global competence needs. The absence of collecting mechanisms about strong feedback concepts from the educational stake holders in colleges and universities in Ethiopia were noted as a barrier to curriculum improvement.

3.2. Analysis of Students Responses

A. Quantitative Data obtained from Students on the Potential Challenges

Respondents from 3rd, 4th and 5th year students studying at 7 different universities (Addis Ababa University, Kotebe University of Education, Adama Science and Technology University, Selale University, Wolkite University, Debre Birhan University and Mekdela Amba University) were selected to fill out questionnaire on the challenges encountered by their respective universities regarding teaching learning and instruction, digital literacy and technology use, instructional language, feedback and follow-up mechanisms, practical learning and industry alignment, academic guidance and service as well as enrollment and student preferences. The questionnaire was administered directly and collected instantly. 751 student respondents out of the 765 targeted samples filled in the questionnaires on time. Accordingly, the response rate of the students' questionnaire was 98.04%. Challenges across seven critical domains of education based on descriptive statistics is shown in the table below

Table 4: Students' responses to challenges in producing competent graduates

	Descriptive Statistics			
No	Challenges Pertatining to	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Instructional Language, English	757	3.1731	1.12118
2	Digital Literacy and Technology Use	756	3.0423	1.08978
3	Enrollment and Student Preferences	759	3.0751	1.24171
4	Feedback and Follow up	757	3.1942	1.14692
5	Teaching Learning and Instruction	765	3.0758	.81862
6	Practical Learning and Industry Allignment	763	2.9509	.94780
7	Academic Guidance and Services	765	3.0734	.84463
	Valid N (listwise)	750		

The data regarding students' perceptions of English language proficiency as a challenge in using it as a medium of instruction shows 3.17 mean score. Its standard deviation is 1.12 which designates variability in responses, pointing to differing experiences among students regarding

the impact of English proficiency on their education. The moderate mean indicates that challenges in using English as medium of instruction are prevalent among the student respondents. A relatively narrow standard deviation suggests that while most participants experience the challenge, their severity is not widely spread. Language related challenges may include comprehension difficulties, low proficiency among teachers or students and limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

The table above portrays that the mean score is slightly above 3.0 which is moderate challenge in the adoption and application of digital literacy and technology. The data revealed that while many students acknowledge difficulties, a noteworthy number feel more confident in their digital skills. The standard deviation of 1.089 suggests a moderate level of variability in responses, highlighting the differing levels of confidence among students regarding their digital literacy capabilities. This low variability may also imply a consistent perception of this challenge, likely due to systematic issues such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of devices, or insufficient training on digital tools.

The mean value (3.075) of enrolment and program selection indicates a moderately challenging area. Students are not entirely satisfied. The high standard deviation (1.242) on enrollment to programs and preferences indicates as a challenge though to some students may find the process straight forward. The differences could be tied to accessibility of information about programs, program specific complexities such as financial barriers including tuition fee, location, resource constraint, institutional and market need influences. Mismatches between student interests and available program offerings could lead to dissatisfaction.

The data regarding feedback mechanisms and follow up reveals a moderate challenge with the lowest standard deviation among all domains (SD=1.146) pointing to a shared understanding of their limitations. It reveals varying level of dissatisfaction. The students' perception of receiving timely feedback from instructors (mean value of 3.194) suggests that it is persist among students and the most significant challenge in the data shown. The standard deviation of 1.14 reflects some variability in responses, suggesting that while many students may appreciate the feedback process, others experience significant delays that could affect their learning outcomes. The limitations in the provision of constrictive and timely feedback might include delays in providing

feedback, generic guidance that lacks personalization, or insufficient academic resources. This also could reflect issues with response time, transparency, or the consistency of feedback mechanisms.

The data illustrates that teaching, learning and instruction are moderately perceived challenge with a lower standard deviation (0.818) compared to other domains in the data. The high variability highlights disparities in curriculum-related issues which may stem from outdated content, lack of alignment with real-world and market needs, extent of content coverage and inadequate instructional methods. The data shows a notable portion of respondents' experience challenges regarding the comprehensiveness of their course offerings and many students face challenges that affect their overall learning experience (M=3.075; SD=0.818). While teaching practices may be broadly functional, there may still be gaps in pedagogical methods or content delivery that need refinement.

The data regarding students' perception of how well their university aligns instructional practices with current industry demands shows a mean score of 2.950, indicating a moderate level of satisfaction. This lowest mean among the domains shown in the data, indicates relatively fewer perceived challenges. The moderate standard deviation (0.947) suggests some variation in student experiences. The data suggests that many students do not feel adequately supported in translating theoretical knowledge into practical applications. This likely reflects a misalignment between academic programs and real-world industry requirements, such as limited internship opportunities or outdated curricula, insufficient time allotment for laboratory practices.

The data about institutional guidance and services suggests (M=3.073) a moderate challenge but exhibit variability (SD=0.844). This reflects in how institutions provide orientation programs, career guidance, and other support systems. The standard deviation of 0.844 indicates variability in student perceptions, highlighting the need for institutions to evaluate and potentially enhance their tutorial and academic support services to better meet the diverse needs of their students.

Table 5: One Sample T-test of Students' responses about challenges

No	Challenges Pertaining to:	One-Sample Test					
		Test Value = 3.00					
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
1	Instructional Language, English	4.247	756	0	0.17305	0.0931	0.253
2	Digital Literacy and Technology Use	1.068	755	0.286	0.04233	-0.0355	0.1201
3	Enrollment and Student Preferences	1.666	758	0.096	0.0751	-0.0134	0.1636
4	Feedback and Follow up	4.658	756	0	0.19419	0.1124	0.276
5	Teaching Learning and Instruction	2.56	764	0.011	0.07577	0.0177	0.1339
6	Practical Learning and Industry Alignment	-1.432	762	0.152	-0.04915	-0.1165	0.0182
7	Academic Guidance and Services	2.404	764	0.016	0.07342	0.0135	0.1334

It can be seen from the table that the p-value (0.000) of using English as instructional language is less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference. The result also reveals that the mean difference of 0.173 suggests that the instructional language proficiency is perceived differently compared to the test value of 4.247. The confidence interval value shown is a small but consistently positive within the interval (0.0931, 0.253). This domain is identified as a notable challenge in producing competent graduates based on the data.

The p-value (0.286) of Digital Literacy and Technology use is greater, implying no statistically significant difference. The mean difference of 0.04233 suggests minimal deviation from the test value. The confidence interval indicates that the difference may range from slightly negative to slightly positive (-0.0355, 0.1201) which is a neutral perception. The data about enrolment and student preferences depicts that the p-value0.096 is greater than 0.05, showing no significance difference. The mean difference is almost negligible (0.0751). The confidence interval reveals neutrality, reflecting in the interval (-0.0134, 0.1636).

Feedback and follow-up domain (t=4.658) indicated in the table reveals that the p-value is 0.000, implying a statistically significant positive difference. The mean difference of 0.19419 suggests it is perceived positively relative to the value. The positive perception is consistent across the interval (-0.1124, 0.0276). This domain shows the highest deviation. It indicates inadequacy of effective feedback and follow-up mechanisms.

As it can be seen from the above table that the p-value (0.011) of teaching, learning and instruction is far from 0.05 which reveals no significant difference. The mean difference is 0.07577; its confidence interval result shows a similar value to digital literacy indicating

moderate (0.0177, 0.1339) perception. Challenges in this area may stem from outdated pedagogical approaches, insufficient teachers preparation, and inadequate instructional resources. As far as practical learning and industry alignment result is concerned the data shows the p-value is 0.152, indicating a high statically significant negative difference. The mean difference of -0.12915 reflects dissatisfaction with practical learning and industry alignment. The confidence interval reveals negative perception (-0.1965, -0.0618). Weak alignment between theoretical knowledge and practical skills is evident though not statistically significant.

B. Quantitative Analysis of Compiled Data obtained from Students and Instructors questionnaires.

To reach at a general conclusion about the challenges those institutions of higher educations of Ethiopia encounter the data collected from both students and instructors has been compiled and analyzed as one. The descriptive analysis of compiled data is displayed as follows.

Table 6: Descriptive analysis of institutional challenges compiled data

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Sum	Expected Mean	Calculated Mean	≥ 3.00	< 3.00	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness
Institutional Challenges - total	1089	3294.1	3.00	3.02	47.70%	52.80%	0.71	0.5	0.05

As it is shown in Table 6, the number of respondents reacted to both the students' and instructors' questionnaire is 1039. The sum total of the points of this data set is 3294.1. Having 0.02 mean differences with the expected mean value 3.00, the value of calculated mean is 3.02. This shows that the difference between the values of the calculated and the expected means is not that much large. The measures of 47.70% respondent answers are greater than or equal to the expected mean. The answers of the rest 52.80% have measure point less than the expected mean 3.00. Contradictory results are observed in this result of descriptive analysis. These are the value of the calculated mean and the percentage of respondents whose responses measure below the expected mean. As clarified above, the calculated mean exceeds the expected mean. While the answers of 52.80% respondents have measures below the expected mean. One is above the expected mean, while the other is below the expected mean. So it is difficult to judge the manifestation of challenges in the universities based on this descriptive statistics.

The 0.71 value of standard deviation shows that much amount of data is clustered near the calculated mean. The value of variance 0.5 is also low variance that shows the data points are closer to the calculated mean. The value of skewness of this data point is 0.05. It shows that on a normal curve distribution graph the bell curve of this data set is a left-skewed distribution that is longer on the right side of its peak than on its left. Most of the data is clustered below expected mean. This descriptive statistical analysis of the data of instructional challenges obtained from both students' and instructors' questionnaires do not show whether universities are encountering challenges in producing competent graduates or not. So with the intention of reaching at conclusions derived from verifiable evidences, one sample t-test is computed. The result of the analysis is displayed as follows.

Table 7: One sample t-test of students'' & instructors compiled data on institutional potential challenges

One-Sample Test

	standard error of mean	Test Value = 3						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Lower	95% Confidence Upper	Cohens' d
Instructors' Institutional Challenges-compiled	0.02	1.159	1088	.247	.02487	-.0172	.0670	1.16

As it is shown in Table 7, the difference between the calculated and the expected means is statistically not significant ($t = 1.159$, $df. = 1088$, $p < 0.05$).The significance level of the data of the institutional challenges compiled data of students and instructors is Sig=0.247, greater than 0.05. So the expected mean and the calculated mean are statistically not significantly different. In addition to the level of significance it is possible to infer the result of one sample t-test based on the lower and the upper interval values. AS the result of one sample t-test analysis presented in table 7 shows, the upper and the lower interval values are not on the same side of zero. Crossing zero one is negative and the other is positive, then the means are statistically not significantly different. So it is possible to infer that the universities are experiencing institutional challenges that obstruct them from producing competent graduates. To know the effect size Cohen's d was computed. As it is shown in table 7, the result is $d = 1.16$. The effect size of 1.16 in a one sample t-test indicates a large effect. This validates the conclusion that higher institutions of Ethiopia are facing challenges in producing competent citizens.

II. Results of interview related to the monitoring and controlling mechanisms that the higher institutions are using to solve the institutional challenges

Most universities are trying to avoid challenges through upgrading their leadership quality, staff development, improving supporting staff, creating suitable working environment, etc.

Leadership Qualities

There are possibilities of upgrading Ethiopian HEIs into an effective change and innovation through the leadership capabilities at different stages of the universities. For example, the university management offices begging from departments need to provide the right decisions at the right time to perform effective tasks. For instance, some departments invite PhD and masters students' evaluators with regarding to their friendship they have. Supporting this situations, the university management interview respondent five (Rs) explained that departments and the colleges or faculties are not assigning the right evaluators during MA or PhD defenses. His can be taken as a vivid exemplary how the university management offices are contributing for the deterioration of quality education in EHIs currently. These situations in turn can lead EHIs into the deterioration of the Ethiopian nations and nationalities customs, values and traditions. Some values of higher education: transparency equitable access, accountability, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and social responsibility are going to be diminished and destroyed.

Management interview respondent (R_2) reported that the university management office experts are not leading the EHIs in right way due to personal and group interests . Furthermore, since Ethiopia is a developing country, there are scarifies of finance for the development of EHIs in relation with the academic educational systems. Management respondent interview (T3) explained that budgeting adequate finance can solve problems in EHIs. The other interviewee management respondent (F4) claimed shortage of budget and resources for practical lessons.

Staff Development

Implementing continuous professional development programs for educators to keep them update d with the latest teaching methodologies and industry trends can be taken as the solution to improve education quality. There are problems of accessing adequate numbers of instructors in some disciples in the universities.

In addition, insufficient number of instructors leading to delays in course starts. According to instructors' interview, for example (**T6)** described that professional training development for graduate students' focusing on professional knowledge and skills can help learners to use

technology applications, teaching methodologies and pedagogical concepts, professional knowledge and skills. He explained that programs such as ELIC, HDP, CPD and others can contribute a lot for the professional development. For example, from instructors' interview respondent (T3) suggested that he saw and realized that his university English language department students are weak in their language skills and knowledge as well as in their learning competences. As a result, graduating class students need serious and continual professional development skills to be effective professionals. Also introducing quality assurance mechanisms to monitor and enhance the educational standards is one of the principles to enhance professional knowledge and skills.

With regarding to instructors and management interview respondents, it is advisable that graduate students as well as teachers should be given consecutive trainings. Some instructors lack the necessary skills or commitment, impacting the quality of teaching.
When teachers are given trainings, they will improve their professional knowledge and skills. Both graduate students and instructors those who have got applied degree need to be trained in technological applications, teaching methodologies, pedagogical concepts, soft skills, financial awareness, CPD, HDP, ELIC and the likes so as to improve their knowledge and skills. In addition, teachers should upgrade themselves in doing researches. And they are advised to publish articles.

Integration of Theory and Practice

One of the problems of EHIs is the emphasis of theoretical aspects of the instruction on the expense of practical aspects of the instructional process. For example, F1 argued that BDU produces educational modules that bridge general education theories with practical applications, facilitated by a seven-member task force. F2 also suggested that plans are underway to integrate these modules into the university curriculum, with input from industry advisory boards and student feedback.

Fostering Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

The university is revising its curriculum to be competence-based, incorporating practical experiences like internships and collaborative projects that develop critical skills. Specific

programs, workshops, and interdisciplinary courses aim to enhance students' analytical and problem-solving abilities.

Collaboration with Industry

Few EHIs tries to collaborate with industry partners, employers, and professional organizations through advisory boards and joint projects to ensure the curriculum aligns with job market needs. Their main purpose is to equip students with essential skills intended to alleviate bookish knowledge challenges of students'. The university recognizes variability in student preparedness based on regional backgrounds and is implementing targeted training. When students integrate their theoretical knowledge with the practical implementation and application of the conceptual aspects of the course they are learning, they could be practical learners. Students have numerous opportunities for internships and cooperative education programs, allowing them to gain practical experience and industry-specific skills. However, the practical educational instruction process is based on theoretical aspect than to practical. For example, interview respondents F5 replied that EHIs educational colleges' instructional process should be interwoven into practical aspects of the instruction.

Other respondents explained that there are biased and unclear EHIs management office decisions. They are giving decisions in relation to their personal advantageous: personal relationships, financial advantageous and so on. The EHIs announced that university instructors those who didn't participate in doing research and giving community services should not be delivered advantageous as equal with those who participated. If this trend continued new knowledge and innovations cannot be transferred to the coming generations. For example management interview respondent ($R_{2)}$ reported that the university management office experts are not leading the EHIs in right way due to personal and group interests. Management respondent interview (T3) explained that budgeting adequate finance can solve problems in EHIs. The other interview management respondent (F4) claimed that no sufficient budget and resources for practical lessons.

According to instructors' interview, for example (T6**),** professional training development for graduate students' focusing on professional knowledge and skills can help learners to use technology applications, teaching methodologies and pedagogical concepts, professional

knowledge and skills. He explained that programs such as ELIC, HDP, CPD and others can contribute a lot for the professional development. For example, from instructors' interview respondent (T3) suggested that he saw and realized that some university English language department students are weak in their language skills and knowledge as well as in their learning competences. As a result, graduating class students need serious and continual professional development skills to be effective professionals. According to T4 and T5, introducing quality assurance mechanisms to monitor and enhance the educational standards is one of the principles to enhance professional knowledge and skills.

Interviewees T7 and T8 replied that there are no comfortable reading spaces as well as libraries for students to study. T9 and T10 claimed that there are very limited digital related library services. Moreover, they further argue that there are shortages of instructors, clear problems in instructors' competencies, absence of enough support on tutorial services, internet access, computer access and shortages of practical or skill practice centers.

4. Discussions

The results of the descriptive analysis of this study show the teaching learning and methods classification is equivalent to the minimum requirement. This means the fulfillment reaches the minimum requirement that is near to 50% and the rest 50% of the accomplishment is undone. In other words the activity is half done. Having filthy percent deficiency in teaching learning and methods, it is impossible to confirm that the teaching learning is being conducted at the level of producing competent graduates. So, one of the most potential barriers to produce competent graduates could be related to the partly ineffective ways of the teaching and learning practices.

Results show that the instructional delivery, strategies, processes and behaviors which lead to student outcome are not going on efficiently. It is undeniable this inefficiency affects the quality of education. Even though the existence of 50% teaching learning achievement has helped the institutions of higher education to produce graduates of the present-day, the rest 50% deficiency makes those graduates inefficient who cannot apply and validate the learned concepts and principles in real world scenarios in meaningful way. This averts graduates of institutions of higher education from dealing with practical problems effectively. According to Williams (2004) and Brookfield (2017), institutions can produce competent graduates when they are able to

qualify and allow learners to take part through assessment design, providing opportunities for conversational feedback and enabling students to engage in reflective and experience sharing practices.

Results also highlight that universities fail to align their curriculum content and learning practices with industry or the real world demands. When universities fail to adapt their curricula and instructional methods to reflect current industry trends and when they fail to give the right mentoring follow up, they create a fertile ground for producing graduates who are ill-prepared for the workforce, which can negatively impact their employability. Thus, in order to produce competent graduates, universities should keep clear alignment between university courses and instructional practices with the wider world job requirements, and that they should practically prove the alignment by providing the necessary fellow up during students' mentorship.

It is clear that curriculum alignment with the job market has many benefits for students in and after their stay in universities. By aligning the curriculum students can have a better thought of their courses and how every course integrates. It also confirms students are ready for the market that needs them. Ngampo (2021, pp. 523-524) for example, states that "The relevance of education is the level of linkage between goals and program outputs in terms of normative ideal sizes supported by the accuracy of input, process, and output elements. The relevance of higher education for students is related to graduates' ability to adjust their skills to the world of work.

In particular, it should be noted that as we are in the era of digital education universities need to establish more of digitalized education and service delivery systems. As Saong, Bonifacio & Gili (2023) noted, the social changes that appear in the world have changed the role of the universities. In addition to education, scientific research and community service, they appear in achieving economic and social prosperity; and protection through advanced digital technology. Their role may change to satisfy the new demands placed on them by a digitally enabled education in order to enable the society cope with the new social changes. In this regard, the survey result shows clear gap in digitalizing education. It is so important to narrow the gap between university curricula, technological demands and the social markets. This implies that there is a call for universities to consider curricula revision to meet the present education goals and the actual industry manpower demands.

A study by Shmatko (2013), for example, investigated the competencies required by graduates to thrive in the innovation labor market. The study intended to pinpoint first degree graduate students' competencies, practices, attributes, and challenges valued in industries. This study could be viewed in four major thematic areas including identification of policy implications, graduates' competencies, assessment of their skills gaps, and preparation for innovation careers. The findings show that the competencies which are most relevant and valuable for graduates include technical skills, problem-solving abilities, creativeness, adaptation, and entrepreneurial mindset. The study also tried to assess whether graduates possess the necessary competencies required by the innovation labor market. It attempted to analyze the gap between the efficacy of graduates' skills and the innovative firms/industries demands. The study suggests educational institutions should prepare graduates for careers in innovative sectors by maintain the quality of the effectiveness of curricula, teaching methods, and experiential learning opportunities in fostering the development of innovation-related competencies.

The other significant finding is related to English language proficiency. If teachers have low language proficiency, it is very difficult to clearly communicate a lesson to the students. Koda (2005), for example, highlights that language proficiency is crucial for effective reading comprehension and academic performance, particularly, in environments where English is the medium of instruction. The findings suggest that the majority of students acknowledge language proficiency as a challenge. Hence, unless measures taken to improve teachers skills of English language proficiency, it is quite difficult to secure quality of lesson delivery and students' learning, in particular, and quality of the education system in general.

Equally important is that universities should value the role of mentorship in enhancing the internship experience their students. Within this context, Coco (2000) makes clear that internships is allowing student to gain practical experience while receiving guidance from mentors. Effective mentorship can significantly influence students' professional development and readiness for the workforce, making it a critical component of the internship process.

Overall, the results highlight the critical need for improvement in the content of curriculum, its alignment with the job market requirements, provision of strict mentorship follow up, digital

education, university services, facilities, academic supportive sectors, and instructors' academic practices, pedagogical and instructional approaches.

5. Conclusion

Overall, while higher education institutions are performing well in traditional academic areas and fostering lifelong learning, there is a clear need to enhance practical and experiential learning opportunities to better meet student expectations and industry standards. The data points to several systemic issues within higher education institutions, ranging from feedback mechanisms and resource availability to support for students and practical learning opportunities.

The results highlight the critical need for improvement in the content of curriculum, its alignment with the job market requirements, provision of strict mentorship follow up, digital education, university services, facilities, academic supportive sectors, and instructors' academic practices, pedagogical and instructional approaches. There is also an urgent call for integrating academic practices with entrepreneurial, problem solving skills and hands-on experiences. In particular, the question of improving teachers and students' English language skills found to be of the most commonly agreed challenge. Possibly, unless solved on time, those identified challenges could be of the potential leading attributes which could escalate the worsening of quality of education and standards of graduate competencies.

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