

# Reshaping Ethiopia's Higher Education Curriculum to Tackle Youth Unemployment

Ethiopia has seen remarkable economic growth in the past decade, and there has been high demand for construction work to keep up with the pace of change. As part of the country's Growth and Transformation Plans (GTPs) unprecedented efforts have been made to grow the university sector, particularly science and technology degrees, which has resulted in an increase in engineering graduates. However, universities produce graduates equipped with theoretical knowledge but often lacking the practical skills that employers look for. The mismatch between the theoretical skills gained in higher education and the practical skills needed by the private construction sector means that engineering graduates often end up unemployed or underemployed. The evaluation of GTP II and the creation of GTP III from 2020 are key opportunities to revise the higher education curriculum in collaboration with the private sector to make it fit for purpose and reduce graduate unemployment.

## Constructing Ethiopia's future

In its bid to become a middle-income country by 2025, Ethiopia has achieved an average 10 per cent economic growth per year in the past decade. Its two Growth and Transformation Plans since 2010 have set ambitious objectives to achieve this vision. The construction sector has formed a key component of GTP II, to build infrastructures including transport, telecommunications, schools, and health. The sector is labour-intensive, employs approximately 11 per cent of the formal sector and has provided huge employment opportunities, particularly for low-skilled workers. However, the sector is also characterised by precarious employment, shortages in raw materials and foreign exchange, and delayed government contracts.

## Growth of higher education in Ethiopia

One of the initiatives set out in GTP I was to increase participation in universities, particularly in science and technology. As a result, the number of higher education institutions in Ethiopia grew rapidly from 2 in 2000 to 44 in 2016, and total undergraduate enrolment almost doubled between 2009 and 2016 alone. Higher education institutions admitted students in the ratio 70 per cent science and technology to 30 per cent social science fields (the '70:30 policy') as part of this strategy. Alongside this growth, however, the quality of higher education graduates and the universities themselves has been highlighted as a major problem. Ethiopia has one of the highest graduate unemployment

rates in East Africa, with almost half of graduates unemployed for the first year. Concerns about quality relate to the higher education curriculum, government funding to universities, and infrastructure and resources, among others.

## Effects of skills gaps on graduate employment

Research findings indicate that although engineering graduates have theoretical knowledge, there are gaps in their practical skills, including: time management, commercial awareness, problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and other vital skills for construction. The growth of the construction sector has introduced new and more-developed processes that include many actors such as contractors, consultants and material suppliers, but the growth of higher education has not produced a workforce that can deliver and manage them. Companies are either unable to employ graduates due to lack of practical skills for the level of jobs they apply for, or have to invest time and money in training them to reach the required standards.

Engineering graduates who are unable to find graduate-level employment seek alternative work, but often end up doing jobs that they are overqualified for. For example, some engineers work as bricklayers for cobblestone projects, but they feel that these jobs can be performed by people with lower levels of training such as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The prevalence of gaps and mismatches between their skills and the needs of the

sector is a source of disappointment for the graduates themselves in terms of unrealised expectations, lower returns on investment in education, lower wages, and lower job satisfaction.

According to interviews with both engineering graduates and employers in the construction sector, causes of skills gaps and mismatches include:

**Higher education curriculum:** Many engineering graduates find that their training is less relevant for the work they do after leaving university. After being unable to secure graduate-level work related to their degree, many work on cobblestone projects, or as salesmen/saleswomen, hotel receptionists and storekeepers. Some are inactive, unable to find employment. In their opinion, this undermines their five-year university education and wastes the scientific knowledge and skills obtained during it. A key concern is that the higher education curriculum does not take into account the needs of the construction sector, and does not equip graduates with the required skills and knowledge to seek graduate-level employment in the sector.

**Precariousness of the construction sector:** State-led and state-financed construction projects are vulnerable to contract delays, underfinancing and even cancellations, which makes it difficult for employers in the construction sector to create multiple, permanent positions. Graduates

who are able to find employment in the construction sector speak of being overloaded and expected to cover two or three different project roles at one time; for example, manager, site manager, and design manager. If longer-term and more stable contracts were made available to the construction sector, it is feasible to imagine that private sector companies could split these doubled and tripled roles to create more jobs for unemployed graduates to apply to. But, at the same time, universities must be producing graduates who are equipped to take on these roles.

**Lack of resources:** Graduates identify major infrastructural problems at universities, with a lack of furnished classrooms supported by technologies; or complete laboratories, workshops, and stores; or modern libraries with updated and adequate books. Alongside this there are shortages of well-trained teachers, and not enough staff to cover the courses in some semesters. Inadequate funding for teaching and learning at universities has played a role in the low level of graduate quality.

Employers in the construction sector use a variety of strategies to overcome skills gaps and mismatches, including sub-contracting work to other contractors, short-term training, and coaching. Foreign-owned companies have taken to bringing in skilled staff from abroad whilst employing a lower-skilled or unskilled domestic workforce.

## Policy recommendations

1. Government and education providers must work collaboratively with the private sector to reshape the engineering higher education curriculum, to ensure that students are taught both theoretical knowledge and practical skills which will make them employable after graduation and which meet the needs of the construction sector.
2. Government must prioritise funding for quality teacher training, to promote modern teaching methods and increase the quality of teaching in universities. Alongside this, increased funding for university infrastructure and resources will provide a quality learning environment.
3. Government should support the private sector through long-term plans and contracts, which will enable companies to employ graduates for longer periods and on stable contracts.



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## Further reading

Ayele, S.; Khan, S. and Sumberg, J. (2017) 'Introduction: New Perspectives on Africa's Youth Employment Challenge', *IDS Bulletin* 48.3: 1–13

Yizengaw, J.Y. (2018) 'Skills Gaps and Mismatches: Private Sector Expectations of Engineering Graduates in Ethiopia', *IDS Bulletin* 49.5: 55–70

Salmi, J.; Sursock, A. and Olfir, A. (2017) *Improving the Performance of Ethiopian Universities in Science and Technology: A Policy Note*, Washington DC: World Bank

World Bank (2018) *Africa's Pulse, Spring 2018: Analysis of Issues Shaping Africa's Economic Future*, Washington DC: World Bank

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