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Review

Overview of Ethiopian Public Higher Education: Trends, System, Challenges, and Quality Issues

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Abstract: Education is a pillar of the socio-economic development of a nation. Higher education (HE) is an engine for national development through producing the required skilled manpower, technology, innovations, research, and training services. The purpose of this study is to highlight the functioning, challenges, and emerging initiatives in public universities in Ethiopia. It employs a narrative review method for the synthesis of the findings. A total of 2004 published articles were searched using Boolean syntax from Scopus, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Web of Sciences databases, and 40 articles were maintained for analysis. Thus, the Ministry of Education (MoE) oversees the overall system of higher education. Public universities have shown relatively rapid expansion in the last three decades compared to the 1950s, followed by an increase in gross enrollment rate (GER). However, concerns were raised about the sustainability of these changes due to low investment in the educational sector. Various reforms have been introduced into the higher education system like differentiation, curriculum changes, national comprehensive exit exams for undergraduates, and admission tests for postgraduate programs. The higher education system is struggling with persistent challenges such as quality concerns, inadequate educational inputs, rigid structure, poor working environments, unemployment, and professional skill gaps. Due emphasis should be given to strengthening leadership, supplying adequate educational resources, sustainable financing, staff development, improving service delivery, and quality education.

Keywords: education; higher education; quality; university; Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa and is characterized as the oldest independent nation in the world; home to diversity in religion, ethnicity, language, and culture, it is the symbol of independence for Africa during the colonial period and is a founding member of the League of Nations and the Organization of African Unity [1]. Ethiopia has a total population of 126.5 million, making it the second most populous nation in Africa after Nigeria with a per capita gross national income of USD 1020. The country aims to reach lower-middle-income status by 2025 [2].

Ethiopia is endowed with plenty of natural and man-made resources, customs, traditions, heritage resources, and diversities. Worku [3] highlighted UNESCO's nine tangible heritage sites at different locations in the country and four intangible heritages, such as Epiphany, Meskel, Erecha, and Chamballa. Moreover, Ethiopia is also known for its diversified religions, languages, and alphabet letters. Amharic is the official working language

of the federal government, the lingua franca for business, commerce, and government. English is also taught as a subject matter in primary and secondary schools and is used as a medium of instruction at secondary schools [4]. It is also used as a medium of instruction in the HE system in the country.

Education helps people to adapt to the demands of the rapidly changing world [5]. Higher education has the power to change the lives of individuals in particular and society at large [6]. It has also a significant role in the development of low- and middle-income countries which are still on the path to industrialization through accessing higher levels of science, technology, innovation, and research [6,7]. With the emergence of the 'knowledge economy', higher education has gained attention for its strategic importance for national development, leading to an increase in the political will to integrate the sector with development goals [8]. Moreover, the Human Development Index (HDI) data reveal a positive association between the growth in gross enrolment ratio (GER) in tertiary education and the economic as well as social growth of countries [6,9].

Modern HE is a young and growing sector in Ethiopia which began in the 1950s. There are about 49 government higher education institutions and 128 accredited non-government higher education institutions in Ethiopia [10]. The government allocates about 3% of its GDP to education sector development [11], although it is lower than average for the Sub-Saharan Africa region. Generally, higher education institutions in Ethiopia are underfunded and understaffed [12].

Higher education systems consist of dynamic and complex issues that require continuous investigation. To play its role in socio-economic development, the system must adapt to the ever-changing demands of the world. Despite the encouraging expansion of HE in the country, it struggles with enduring challenges. Molla [13] stated that the Ethiopian HE system has encountered persistent challenges in the areas of quality, relevance, academic freedom, and equity. There is also a deficiency of a systematic educational quality assurance mechanism across all educational ladders in Ethiopia [14]. Specifically, Boateng [15] noted that the higher education system is suffering from financial and quality challenges. Hence, Van Deuren and colleagues [16] suggested further studies on public universities in Ethiopia from different generations. Moreover, the new educational development roadmap of Ethiopia did not address the relevant parts of the education system [17]. Even though studies have examined practices and challenges related to infrastructure, expansion, and curriculum reforms, there is no comprehensive study like this one that could provide a full picture of the higher education system.

Therefore, this review aims to serve various purposes upon its completion. It attempts to synthesize evidence and perspectives in a single comprehensive resource on the functioning, challenges, and initiatives of higher education systems in Ethiopia. It can serve as a stepping stone for further research to enhance the quality of education at the tertiary level. This study also ignites the initiation of the internationalization of Ethiopian higher education institutions. It is intended to increase the attention of educational stakeholders to areas of best practices, challenges, gaps, and insight for intervention in this sector. Furthermore, it could improve collaborative activities with international scholars and organizations, thereby enhancing the overall reputation of Ethiopian higher education institutions on a global scale.

2. Research Questions

This study aims to highlight the overall functioning of the public higher education system in Ethiopia. It is a comprehensive synthesis of empirical evidence about functioning, persistent challenges, and emerging initiatives in the public higher education system. This study addresses the following three research questions:

RQ1. How does the public higher education system function?
RQ2. Do Public higher education institutions encounter persistent challenges?
RQ3. What are the emerging initiatives in the public higher education system?

3. Research Methods

This study employs a narrative review, which is a qualitative evidence summary of the field of research to show an overview of a topic [18]. A literature review is necessary to gain knowledge in a certain field through debate and examination of studies [19]. Narrative review is a qualitative approach that provides readers with up-to-date knowledge [20] and deep understanding through interpretation and critique [21] of a specific topic/theme. Procedurally, narrative review involves gathering relevant studies, providing summaries, and discussing them [19], which fits the purpose of this study. It does not describe a predefined methodological approach that would permit the reproduction of data nor answer specific quantitative research questions [21]. Generally, the narrative review employed in the study is characterized by a broad overview of a topic-related research area without adhering to a predefined protocol. Above all, it focuses on the author's intuition and research experience rather than strict criteria for data extraction [22].

Therefore, the authors developed the searching strategies to gather previous empirical studies on the area from well-known scientific databases. The literature search mainly emphasized synthesizing evidence about how the public higher education system functions, its trends, and identifying bottlenecks in quality education. The sources were retrieved from credible databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Web of Science which have been published from 2014 up to 2024. The repository data about governmental policies, reports, letters, and annual abstracts were retrieved from the official websites of the MoE (https://moe.gov.et, accessed on 13 June 2024), Addis Ababa University, and Wollo University. Boolean syntax (("Public higher education" OR "Higher education" OR "Tertiary education") AND (trends OR development OR "quality issues") AND Ethiopia) was used to identify the relevant literature to achieve the study's purpose. A total of 2004 articles were found from those selected databases after using additional filters such as language (English), time frame (10 years), and study locations in Ethiopia. Moreover, screening for duplications, relevance, English language, and other criteria were used to filter out best-fit articles. Finally, the authors decided to maintain 40 articles for the final synthesis of the knowledge, gaps, and debates in the study area. Moreover, an additional 10 governmental policy documents and reports from the Ministry of Education (MoE) were used to strengthen the synthesis of those findings from the empirical papers.

Moreover, this study used a qualitative approach to explore in-depth the public higher education system in Ethiopia and aims to provide a better understanding of how the institution is functioning, the challenges of the system, and the overall institutional initiatives. Thus, a thematic analysis was conducted to synthesize the evidence gathered from all of the selected sources.

4. Results

This section consists of the synthesis of previous research findings, quality education frameworks, legal documents, and reports about public universities gathered from different databases and websites. The findings are analyzed under three main themes: functioning, persistent challenges, and emerging initiatives. Finally, the authors provide discussions on those themes and draw conclusions.

4.1. Functioning of Public Higher Education System

The functioning of the higher education system consists of various interconnected entities. The core operational systems of the higher education system addressed in this review are as follows: HE relevance, structure, and expansion; higher education access; higher education curricula; academic programs; teaching, learning, and assessment; staff development and research; and community engagement.

4.1.1. Higher Education Relevance, Structure and Expansion

Higher education in Ethiopia consists of post-secondary education beyond grade 12 in different subject areas such as engineering and technology, social sciences, medicine,

agriculture, etc. It also includes four levels: a diploma program, bachelor's or undergraduate degree program, masters or post-graduate diploma and degree programs, and doctoral programs. Recently, the Education and Training Policy made a reorganization of the education system from pre-primary to higher education (Figure 1).

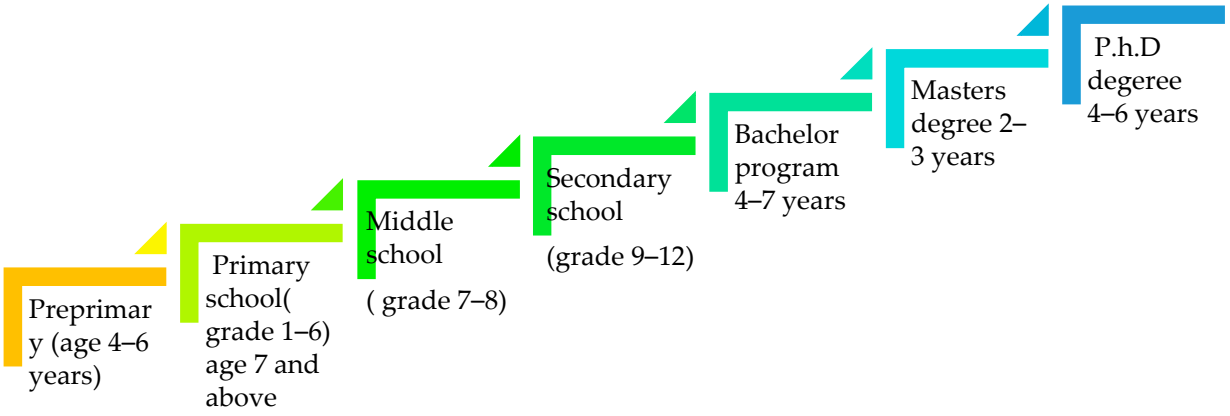

Figure 1. The existing education system in Ethiopia. Source: MoE [23].

In general, education is the pillar for the all-round development of a developing nation like Ethiopia. The Education and Training Policy (ETP) clearly states the relevance of education for human development and takes it as a high-priority area for the overall socio-economic development endeavor of the government [24,25]. Indeed, higher education plays a critical role in facilitating the socioeconomic development of a country [7,26]. Its primary intent is to transform society through producing skilled manpower, research, and innovation.

HEIs are aimed to prepare demand-driven skilled manpower and internationally competitive graduates, promote research on knowledge and technology transfer, promote freedom of expression, design and implement community services, ensure institutional autonomy, promote and uphold justice, promote multicultural life, and expand access based on demand [23,25,27]. These educational laws and policies expect HEIs to provide quality education, foster research and innovation, and contribute to the overall development of individuals and society. They are centers for promoting critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students. They are also expected to create a conducive learning environment that can prepare students for 21st century challenges and a dynamic world. In practice, the HE system lacks relevance due to imported system models, political entanglement, and the lack of functional HE– industry partnerships [13]. Higher education policies do not adequately address the root causes of gender equality [28].

The structure of higher education institutions has been issued in several proclamations and education laws of the federal government of Ethiopia in different time series [11,23–25,27]. These educational laws have granted the HEIs the authority to develop and enact their own vision, mission, and legislation aligned with the higher education proclamation provisions endorsed by the government. These policy documents also state that the MoE is the highest governing body of the sector, responsible for designing guidelines and directives for universities to execute their duties and responsibilities. Based on these legal documents, higher education institutions in Ethiopia commonly share three pillars from their establishment: teaching and learning, research, and community engagements.

The higher education system operates through a hierarchical administrative structure. The public universities have assigned board members, university presidents, and vice presidents. Public universities also have their own legislation to execute their duties and responsibilities as autonomous entities. The university managing council, university council, and university senate are advisory organs of the president. Most of the public universities have four or more Vice Presidents depending on their broad programs and

resources. The universities consist of various colleges, institutes, schools, departments, and units under the Academic Vice President. The Presidents, Directors, Deans, Vice Deans, and Department Head positions are assigned through competition and include officials. The academic commission consists of the college/school dean, vice deans, department heads, faculty, and student representatives who are responsible for governing the academic affairs and executing their duties.

The sector is struggling with structural problems emanating from within the institutions and external contexts. Above all, Ethiopia's higher education in the 21st century became regimented in its management, old-fashioned in its intellectual framework, limited in its autonomy, and faced with a shortage of experienced staff, due to which the quality of education declined and the level of research outputs weakened [9,29]. Even if it is not working effectively, public universities are liable to follow the guidelines, rules, and directives of the MoE and their legislation. The ministry guides and monitors those institutions by disseminating policies and working guidelines on selective issues either in common for all institutions or for specific institutions.

Historically, higher education is attached to and highly influenced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which has a long tradition of training qualified priests for religious services. Modern higher education began in 1950 with the founding of the University College of Addis Ababa with less than 1000 students and 50 teachers, most of whom were foreigners [9]. This sector was growing too slowly until 1990 with two universities, a total of 38,000 students, and a gross enrollment ratio of 0.08, which was very low even by most African standards [30]. The turning point for the expansion of higher education began after 2000, when an additional six universities were established. More importantly, the years from 1999 to 2007 are characterized by several changes with high student enrolment, diversified fields of study, the opening of new graduate programs in the already established universities, and the establishment of 13 new universities [9]. The study also implies that those countries with higher rates of enrollment in tertiary education showed higher economic growth.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Ethiopia launched a massive higher education expansion and reform that increased the number of public universities to 31, with remarkable changes in the enrollment ratio [1]. This sector has also shown incredible expansion in which the number of public universities has reached between 47 and 110 private institutions that accommodate over 700,000 students—85 percent in the public sector—and had a GER of 10 percent within the last two decades [30]. Despite the growing demand from society, the total number of public universities to date stands at 50, which are located in different regions of the country [31]. The turning point for these positive changes in higher education mainly emphasizes increasing accessibility and enrollment, including the establishment of new universities and the expansion of existing institutions with diversified programs and capacity building [32,33]. However, the expansion of higher education is accompanied by challenges to maintaining educational quality and relevance [9,33]. Undeniably, the sector is facing several challenges, partly due to the current skewed investment towards HE. Secondary education is poorly resourced, resulting in many students entering the system without the appropriate level of preparation [13].

4.1.2. Higher Education Access

Access to higher education is crucial for every country for the reduction in unemployment and poverty, though it remains an unattainable objective [7]. Access versus quality issues are also complex and ongoing debates in the field of education. The contradiction in prioritizing between the expansion of universities and quality is the barrier to quality teaching and learning in higher education [15]. While it is important to ensure access to education for all individuals regardless of their socioeconomic background or geographical location, it is equally crucial to maintain high standards of quality within the educational system.

Globally, higher education GER increased from 19% to 38% between 2000 and 2018, while Sub-Saharan Africa has had the slowest increase in participation rates, being 9% of the world trend [7]. As indicated in Figure 2, there has been a rapid growth in enrollment in tertiary education in Ethiopia over the past two or three decades. However, the country still has the lowest participation rate in the world.

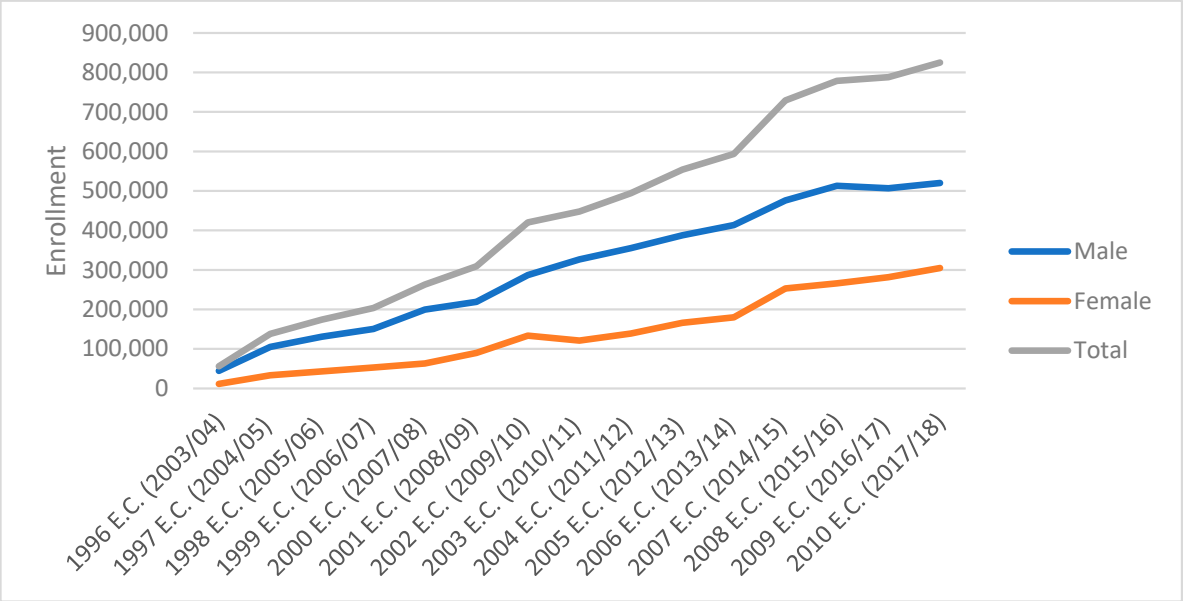

Figure 2. Long-term trends in all undergraduate program enrollment for 15 years. Source: MoE [10].

Figure 2 depicts the trends in enrollment in all programs at public universities. It displays the increasing number of enrollments for fifteen years, from very few, a total of 56,072 in the 2003/04 academic year, to a total of 825,003 in the 2017/18 academic year. Public higher education shoulders the highest responsibility, with the highest capacity from all programs. For instance, in 2017/18, the majority of those undergraduate students, 686,668 (83.2%), were placed in public universities, whereas the rest, 16.8% of students, were enrolled in non-governmental higher institutions. It also reveals gender differences, where more boys were enrolled than girls in all of the academic years indicated. Despite considerable increases in participation, inequality of access to HE has also persisted along the lines of gender, socio-economic status, and political and geographical peripherality [13]. Specifically, the Ethiopian education system has four programs for undergraduates: regular, extension, summer, and distance education programs. Out of these programs, the regular program is the one that took much coverage from the enrollment trends in undergraduates. The Ministry also found that a total of 72,055 students were enrolled in the 2017/18 academic year, from which 60,110 were male and 11,924 were female in postgraduate regular, extension, distance, and summer programs at different fields of study.

Figure 3 shows the specific enrolments of undergraduates (2003/04–2017/18) for each program in the Ethiopian education system. The data confirm that undergraduate enrolment in regular programs has showed significant growth compared to other programs for the last eight years.

Access to HE is essential for all nations, although it remains unattainable for many developing countries. The main barriers to universal access to HE, mainly in sub-Saharan countries, include poverty, crisis and emergency, high tuition fees, entrance examinations, geographical mobility, and discrimination [7]. HE in Ethiopia has also experienced the same challenges. Despite these difficulties, Yimer and colleagues [31] predicted that the enrolment rate of students in higher education continues to grow up while the growth of graduate students drops down.

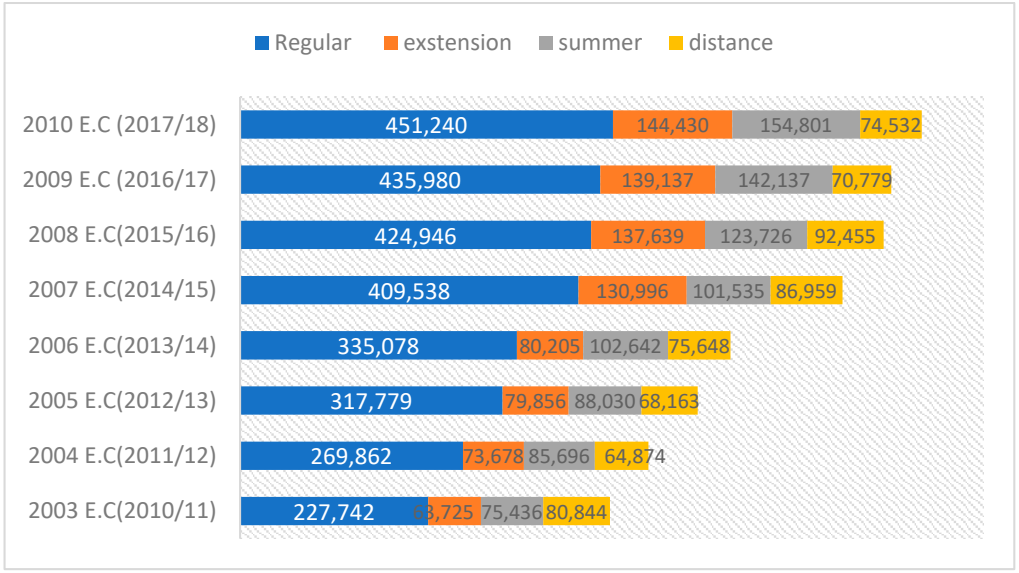

Figure 3. Students' enrollment in each undergraduate program in Ethiopia. Source: MoE [10].

4.1.3. Higher Education Curricula

HE in Ethiopia had undergone curriculum changes and modifications at different time series. Curriculum change is crucial to accommodate the changes in the national and international emerging drives like socio-economic changes, technological advancements, crises, disasters, etc. It can also equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to the rapidly evolving world.

All undergraduate programs have a senate-approved curriculum, usually a harmonized curriculum, with several contents aligned with the university legislation. It also consists of the rationale of the program, degree nomenclature, course lists with credit, admission criteria, graduation requirements, semester course breakdown, and detailed course guidebooks (course outline). Those working curricula are criticized as replicas of the Western education system. HE system in Ethiopia has been built on poorly aligned imported models of curricular and pedagogic practices [33].

The curriculum is the underlying framework of the structure used to deliver a program in an institutional context [12]. On the other hand, a modularized curriculum is a method of organizing and delivering educational content in a segmented and focused manner [32]. The curriculum harmonization guideline stated that a modular curriculum allows students to study specific topics or skills in depth, while also providing flexibility in course selection and sequencing. Moreover, it promotes active learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills by encouraging students to engage with real-world scenarios and apply their knowledge in practical ways. A modularized curriculum, part of the re-engineering of the learning–teaching core process, budgets time not only for instruction, but also for independent learning activities such as reading, doing assignments, and preparing for exams [33,34].

The harmonized modular curriculum has been used for the last few decades in public universities. However, the curriculum change process did not entertain the academic concerns in higher institutions, the balance of the top-down–bottom-up curriculum designing approach was not maintained, and teachers of the higher institutions were not participating in the curriculum change process adequately [29]. In conclusion, the harmonized modularized curriculum has been implemented in higher education institutions, which consists of a modularized teaching and learning process, continuous assessment, and operating quality assurance mechanisms for the past two decades, which were less effective in bringing its intended outcome on the quality of education in the sector [35]. In theory, a modularized program emphasizes the utilization of student-centered pedagogies

and continuous assessment methods, whereas its implementation is under the dominance of traditional lecture-based instruction and continuous testing [36].

4.1.4. Academic Programs in Public Universities

Undergraduate years are the time for one to become broadly informed, a reflective person, and a competent citizen of several communities of which one is a member [12]. Joining a bachelor degree program in Ethiopia was generally awarded on the basis of competitive academic achievement on a nationally conducted high school graduation examination. Later, a quota system was introduced to facilitate the admission of female students and those from outside of Addis Ababa with lower passing marks. The admission scores and placements would be decided by the MoE every year.

Recently, the government of Ethiopia endorsed a new educational policy that redeemed freshman programs to reverse to a 4:2:4 higher education system [23]. Freshman is a one-year program, uniformly implemented with two semesters across all public universities. The Ministry developed guidelines about students' placement for different fields and criteria to be used. The guidelines broadly categorized the fields as natural sciences and social sciences with six bands. The natural science stream consists of band 1 (Engineering science), band 2 (Natural and Computational Science), band 3 (Medicine and Health Science), and band 4 (Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences), whereas the social science category includes band 5 (Business and Economics) and band 6 (Social science and the Humanities). After completing the freshman courses, students will choose the field of study from the available programs in the university on a competitive basis. However, affirmative action would be provided for female students, students with special needs, and other students who come from disadvantaged regions.

4.1.5. Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

Following the implementation of the modular curriculum, block teaching was introduced in higher institutions. A study was conducted by Sewagegn and Diale [37] on block teaching or a modular approach, in which a modular curriculum is considered to be a program whereas block teaching is the instruction used to deliver the curriculum. Furthermore, they conceptualized block teaching as teaching in blocks, where similar courses are grouped together in the same module and delivered in a block format or schedule sequentially in which two credit hour courses are given for 32 classroom hours for eight days, three credit hour courses are given for 48 classroom hours for 12 days and four credit hour courses are given for 64 classroom hours for 16 days. Their study also identified that both teachers and students showed positive attitudes toward block teaching, but they reported very limited practice. The study also examined the barriers to block teaching from the teachers' side, including shortage of time, large class sizes, lack of resources, high workload/teaching load, and weak academic background of students. Students also reported challenges they encountered during the use of block teaching, such as being unable to cover courses, too many assessment activities, lack of feedback from teachers, lack of independent study time, overlapping of activities between courses, and a shortage of resources.

The teaching–learning practices in HE are assumed to be learner-centered approaches guided by the curriculum for each program. For example, cooperative learning pedagogy, as a learner-centered approach, showed positive improvements as the result of the thoughtful and evolving strategy implemented [38]. They suggested that cooperative learning pedagogy can work in HEI classrooms for teaching engineering courses if instructors are motivated and empowered to do so. They also conclude that evidence-based pedagogy in HE in Ethiopia is relatively new and that much of it is based on professional preference rather than what is known to be effective. The integration of research activities with teaching and learning processes also promotes the quality of instruction [39]. From the students' perspective, the quality of their learning was diminished because of poor resources, less concern paid by the institution, teachers' poor pedagogical skills, and bias in marking [40].

The curriculum and educational guidelines of HEIs require institutions and staff to apply learner-centered approaches to encourage active participation in the teaching–learning process in higher education. In contrast, instructors used the traditional approach predominantly [41,42]. The poor teaching and learning activity is also still a burden for the higher education sector due to mismatches between enrollment and the institution's capacity and resources, lack of standardized quality assurance mechanisms, lack of institutional commitment and accountability, and slow quality improvement systems in higher institutions [40].

Continuous assessment is used as an assessment scheme for all undergraduate programs in the harmonized competency-based modularized curriculum [32]. Moges [33] found that most instructors continuously administer and score assessment tasks such as assignments, quizzes, tests, homework, and midterm and final exams throughout the college year as a means of evaluating students' learning and collecting marks in a way that does not encourage the active involvement of students, the main purpose of formative assessment. Although some slight variations have been observed, the practice of assessment often seems to fail in supporting "assessment for learning" in higher education [36]. The main challenges encountered when implementing formative assessment were instructors were not planning different formative assessment methods, sharing learning objectives and assessment criteria early, using peer and self-assessment, giving constructive feedback to students, and classroom questions were not framed in a way that might help students to learn [42]. It further indicated that the practice of assessment often seems to fail in supporting "assessment for learning", irrespective of the great effort that academics put into it. Although slight differences are observed across institutions and specializations, a criterion-based grading scale has been implemented in HEIs for undergraduate programs uniformly.

4.1.6. Staff Development Schemes

The professional development of academic staff is essential for improving the quality of education in Ethiopian HEIs. A study conducted by Biku et al. [43] found that lack of pedagogical training affects both teaching effectiveness and students' achievement negatively. The Higher Diploma Program (HDP) is an initiative aimed at enhancing teaching competencies for new university academic staff [44]. Ideally, professional learning schemes in HEIs include induction training, engagement in research, higher diploma program (HDP) training, independent learning through rigorous reading from various sources, short-term training, seminars, workshops, experience shared with colleagues, career advancement, and studying for the next level [45]. Gebremariam and Sisay [46] emphasized the role of reflective practices for professional development, while university staff are practicing reflections when they encounter barriers such as lack of time, limited institutional support, and a lack of training in reflective practice techniques. Regarding horizontal interactions, academic staff were moderately collaborative in information sharing and informal collaborations/collegial relationships, whereas collaboration in professional activities seems unsatisfactory [47]. The effectiveness of professional training programs is often deterred because of limited logistics, a lack of follow-up, support, and limited opportunities for continuous professional development [38]. However, the sector lacks international frameworks of staff development schemes that would increase job satisfaction, commitment, competence, and efficiency of the academic staff, which in turn supports institutional excellence in training, research, and technological innovation.

The Ministry of Education (MoE, formerly MoSHE) also established national guidelines for academic staff recruitment, promotion, and scholarship schemes. The public universities are liable to this abiding guide and cascade to their working legislation for their action. The guideline consists of the procedures, preconditions, specific criteria, and scoring procedures for promotion and holding scholarship positions. The MoE also developed staff recruitment procedures and criteria in 2018 to be implemented by public universities.

The guideline has fixed requirements, procedures, cut points, and average weights for diversified groups in different job positions to join the academic staff.

According to Abebe and Assemie [48], quality of life at work is crucial for organizations to attract and retain talented and efficient human resources. They also concluded that quality of work life was found to have a statistically significant and positive contribution to the organizational commitment of the academic staff at the university. In contrast, the study identified a poor working environment and the staff's dissatisfaction with the overall working conditions. Therefore, due emphasis should be given to the staff's quality of work life through developing various incentive frameworks to improve their job satisfaction, commitment, and performance, and reduce staff turnover [48].

4.1.7. Research and Community Engagement

Research is one of the core missions of all higher institutions in Ethiopia. As stated in various educational laws and studies [11,23–25,27,30], substantial initiations have been made to make universities the incubation centers of science and technology through research. It provides mandates to conduct research and contribute to national development. It is also relevant to improve the quality of the teaching and learning process in higher education. Integration of research activities with teaching and learning processes promotes quality of instruction, enhances deep learning, promotes confidence, networking, and ensures employability; however, there were limited practices of aligning teaching research outputs and innovative actions in the university [39]. Thus, this program has a significant value for overall national developments, educational reforms, enhancing educational quality, and meaningfully contributing for the larger society to change their livelihoods.

Even if the existing educational laws, proclamations, and university legislations expect university instructors to be engaged in research activities, they are less reactive to this duty. According to Alemu [49], most of the instructors who participated in the study were not engaged in research activities, mainly due to a lack of research skills, lengthy research administration procedures, a lack of facilities, a shortage of funds to conduct research, and a weak research culture, which are severe challenges to research practices at the university. A study on quality education reported that 33 (75%) of university staff did not conduct a research project or participate in any community services [50]. Gidey and Sarangi [51] also identified factors that are affecting research activities, like staff overloading tasks, lack or shortage of budget, lack of clarity in the legislation, and low relevance for academic staff development through publications. Moreover, a study at Hawassa University found that although the university encourages researchers to publish articles in reputable journals, academic staff and postgraduate students were doing research only for the purpose of academic promotion and fulfillment of degrees [39].

4.2. Persistent Challenges in Higher Education

As shown from the findings of various studies, higher education in Ethiopia has shown remarkable changes over the last few decades. However, it has faced enduring challenges that affect various aspects of the educational landscape. Some of the challenges include quality concerns, limited infrastructure, pedagogical skill gaps, and unemployment among graduates. Addressing these issues is critical to sustain changes and improve this sector in order to contribute to socioeconomic development.

4.2.1. Quality Concerns

One of the key concerns in the education sector is quality education. Quality in education is a very complex and multifaceted concept to understand, implement, and measure in an educational context [40]. A study on the health college of a public university reported that the college did its best to maintain quality standards, while the overall evaluation showed that its quality of education is below the acceptable level [50].

It is also an issue of discussion among stakeholders in educational systems all over the world on various concerns. Hence, the government began to introduce the quality assurance

system in higher education institutions with Proclamation Number 351/2003 [27], which has been followed by the birth of a new national agency, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) [25]. The HERQA is the only external quality assurance agency that accredits and audits all types of HEIs in Ethiopia. It defines and operationalizes its procedures and methods, and nominates and appoints external experts even though it has not started evaluation at any of the public universities yet [52].

Even though the MoE has established HERQA and internal quality assurance mechanisms in higher institutions, achieving quality education still remains a critical challenge for the sector. There is also a lack of a systematic educational quality assurance system at all levels of the educational ladder in the country [14]. The quality gap in the teaching and learning process is an enduring challenge due to a lack of standardized quality assurance mechanisms, a lack of institutional commitment and accountability, and slow quality improvement systems in higher institutions [40]. Other studies also explained the inconsistencies among institutions and lower responsiveness from higher institutions for HERQA.

4.2.2. Limited Infrastructures

In addition to developing policies, adequate inputs such as skilled human power and facilities are essential to access quality higher education. However, higher education institutions are challenged with inadequate resources that hinder the attainment of quality education [40]. A study on the evaluation of quality education in health colleges showed that 26 (59.5%) were not satisfied with library facilities whereas student 166 (50%) reported that they were dissatisfied with their college environment [50]. Apart from the inadequate educational facilities and infrastructure, there are limitations on the proper management and utilization of resources in higher education environments.

4.2.3. Pedagogical Skill Gap

For meaningful learning to occur in the classroom, the teacher should be equipped with minimum pedagogical skills. Instructors should develop skills to transfer knowledge. Students of higher education institutions are independent learners where they can develop their knowledge, be creative, and transfer their knowledge to their day-to-day lives by themselves. It should be facilitated systematically by pedagogically trained staff. In other words, meaningful learning can occur in the classroom through active learning strategies by teachers. However, most instructors may often be scared of trying new ways of teaching; rather, they stick to their old-fashioned teacher-centered teaching approach [36]. Significant challenges are also encountered in applying effective teaching strategies and applying pedagogical skills consistently [40]. A study on specific instruction (brain-based) also found that most instructors have good knowledge of brain-based instruction, but do not apply it during their instruction [53]. These authors further stated that there is a tangible gap between instructors' knowledge and classroom practice of brain-based instruction.

4.2.4. Unemployment

One of the hectic challenges of higher education institutions is the increasing rate of unemployed graduates. Chekol [17] concluded that the skill gaps and unemployment among graduates undermine economic growth and widen income inequality and poverty. Furthermore, Yimer and colleagues [31] identified a significant problem with a discrepancy between higher education system efficacy (enrolment and graduation) and graduates' career prospects. The skill gaps of graduates, which is an undesirable outcome of education, are attributed to low enrolment in vocational courses, poor methods of delivery, low input availability and accessibility, low-skilled teachers, and poor school-industry linkage [17]. Another study also showed that graduate unemployment is strongly influenced by age, graduate characteristics, curriculum characteristics, institutional characteristics, and economic and labor market conditions in the country [54]. Specifically, older graduates were more likely to be unemployed. Moreover, curriculum relevance, institutional support, the

graduate's knowledge, and attitude toward employment contribute significantly to their job prospects. This study emphasizes the need to revise the curriculum content to better equip graduates with the competencies needed for the job market.

There needs to be cooperation and a strong link between higher institutions and employers to fix the skill gaps of those graduates. Notwithstanding the ensuing challenges and internal constraints, higher education institutions cannot shy away from the responsibility of reforming themselves at a time when their graduates are deemed unemployable for lack of adequate skills demanded by the labor market [55]. The study also suggested investing much effort in the proper implementation of the broader goals of graduate employability. Moreover, employers need to be engaged in the training efforts of higher education institutions by providing experiential opportunities for trainees and forging close relations with universities, rather than expecting everything to come from institutions in a ready-made fashion [55]. Employers must invest their time and resources to shape their future employees.

4.3. Emerging Initiatives in Higher Education System

This section consists of the newly emerging initiatives in higher education. It integrates the new reforms in the national and international contexts. Addressing these emerging agendas will facilitate institutional excellence, increase readiness to respond to urgent demand appropriately, and increase its participation and contribution to national and international developmental goals.

4.3.1. Differentiation in Higher Education

The MoE took the initiative to restructure public universities with differentiation. Based on the national educational roadmap (2018–2030), university differentiation is critically needed to enhance quality improvement [15,56]. Furthermore, it is the right time to make a change in the sector, which follows similar patterns and trends for a long time [15]. Hence, public universities are differentiated into four categories, namely research universities (8), University of Applied Sciences (15), University of Science and Technology (2), and comprehensive universities (21) [23]. Until differentiation is going to be fully implemented, almost all governmental universities in the country follow similar trends in their missions, visions, governance structure, student admission policies, core activities, and disciplinary mix that defines their program, offering few discrepancies among themselves [56].

As part of the undergoing educational reform, the MoE [23] rationalized the need to implement differentiation among higher institutions mainly to perform the following: open new programs based on the internal capacity of the institutions (staff, educational inputs, infrastructure, and necessary resources); based on their surrounding natural resources, culture, and their existing performance/contexts, detach from the traditional and uniform structure; avoid program and department redundancy; and enhance the standardized teaching–learning process and launch programs compatible with national demand. Further investigations need to be conducted for this initiative to identify its strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and intervention mechanisms that may play a meaningful role in higher education in particular and national development in general.

4.3.2. Comprehensive National Examinations

The MoE introduced new experiences related to comprehensive national examinations in the education system. As depicted in the press release of the Ministry for the last two consecutive years, it introduced strict procedures and new experiences regarding national exams for grade 12 students, undergraduate programs, and postgraduate admissions.

Recently, the setup and procedures of the grade 12th national examination have been changed. Three years ago, the Grade 12 national examination was given at every high school by the Ministry in collaboration with regional education offices. However, the Ministry changed the previous trend by providing the national examination in nearby public universities in collaboration with regional offices, local administrators, and schools.

All of the those students registered for the national examination are supposed to move to their assigned nearby university based on their examination schedule. Moreover, the examination is administered by chief supervisors from MoE, educational offices, and high schools, where invigilators are assigned by university lecturers and professors who are placed at different examination centers. The MoE press release in August 2023 shows that in 2022, from a total of 896,520 examinees, only 30,034 (3.3%) passed the exam, whereas in 2023, from a total of 845,099 examinees, only 27,267 (3.2%) passed the entrance examination.

Of course, the exit exam is not a new experience for the higher education system. A few programs like law school were used to providing exit exams for their prospective graduates. Now, the MoE has widened the exit exam to all prospective undergraduate students. Exit examination is taken as a mechanism of maintaining the quality standards of education in higher education by the Ministry. The National exit exam is prepared based on the core competencies of the curriculum for each program. It is provided online to all graduate students in their home university in collaboration between the home university and the MoE. Once students finish their courses in their program, they should take an exit exam and pass a mark (at least 50 and above) for their degree to be granted. The student can sit for an exit exam based on the programs from the MoE repeatedly. Moreover, the ministry started to launch a new entrance test for the postgraduate program by providing a centrally administered National Graduate Admission Test (NGAT) for all applicants of the master's program in all institutions in any field. This admission exam (NGAT) registration and test began online in collaboration with Addis Ababa University in September 2023 for the first time.

Generally, the reports of the ministry regarding the number of those students who sat in those exams are very limited. As observed in the report, it is below 5% of the total students who sat the examination who passed the grade 12 national entrance examination. Moreover, the majority of those students in the undergraduate programs at public universities were not able to pass their exit examination. However, few congratulations were expressed for only a few programs that were able to make their students pass the exit examination for 100% in limited institutions. This very low rate of passing students from those national examinations may directly imply serious concerns about the education system in the country. These are witness to the deep-rooted, structural, and historically accumulative challenges in the whole education system.

However, there is no evidence found about the quality of those national educational assessments, their implementation processes, or their outcomes. Indeed, national examinations are implemented with huge investments to maintain educational standards and improve quality education at the national level. They need to be examined scientifically and evaluated thoroughly for their alignment with their intended purposes. Moreover, to what extent those national examinations contributed to improving quality education and supporting the existing reforms has not been studied yet. Although national examinations can play a significant role in either maintaining or improving educational quality in higher education, they cannot guarantee quality by themselves. Rather, it is advisable to focus on those additional intervention mechanisms about revitalizing the education system through supplying adequate educational inputs, integrating with research and technology, monitoring the curriculum and policy implementation processes, and aligning this educational assessment feedback with the education system at all levels.

4.3.3. Internationalization, Partnership, and Collaborations

Studies have shown that international partnerships and collaborations play a significant role in the excellent performance of public HEIS, particularly in developing countries like Ethiopia. Kassie and Angerval [57] explained the double faces of international partnerships, where both the local institution and foreign partners have their own organizational interests. They suggested that for Ethiopian HEIs to be successful in using international partnerships for their excellence, like improving educational quality and capacity build-

ing, they should understand and address these challenges and make themselves ready to maximize the benefits from international collaborations.

Tamrat and Tefera [30] stated the challenges in managing international partnerships in a sustainable manner. For instance, most of the institutions that have initiated and managed partnerships with foreign institutions have not handled their engagements in an organized and systematic manner due to a lack of resources and clear directions, whereas in the senior universities, initiatives are managed at different levels without being communicated to the higher officials of the institute or the particular office in charge. Moreover, Gonfa and colleagues [58] noted specific strategies to facilitate internationalizing higher education institutions. Those strategies include collaborations with foreign sister universities, staff exchanges, and joint research projects. Those efforts would bring positive changes in the area of research execution capacity of Ethiopian HEIs and enhance their global standing. However, many of the international trends, like student exchange, are not common among Ethiopian higher institutions, except for a few scholarship provisions for neighboring countries such as Eritrea and South Sudan. Although attempts have been made to encourage institutions for international collaboration and cooperation, there are no specific frameworks and policy guides about institutional internationalization. It is mainly driven by emerging needs. Therefore, adequate conceptualizations of internationalization, institutional cooperation and collaboration, and issuing policy guides should be the next priority for engaging PHEIs in this arena.

5. Discussion

The main findings of the review were discussed in line with the three research questions posed.

RQ1. How does the public higher education system function?

Higher education plays a significant role in socioeconomic development [17,26]. Similarly, the national educational laws and policies expect much from the higher education sector to transform the socio-economic development of the country [23–25]. Still, there is a policy gap in ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment in the higher education system [28]. It plays its role by accomplishing three main missions: producing skilled manpower, conducting research, and providing community services. The MoE oversees the overall system. However, there are gaps between the policy expectations and implementations due to several challenges. The higher education system suffers from enduring challenges such as imported models of the curriculum, rigid structure, poor management, political intrusion, and weak linkage with industries, which limit its relevance [9,13,29]. The debate in prioritizing access to quality is also a concern of various studies. These challenges limit the system's ability to operate its responsibility autonomously, make it unresponsive to changes, and deteriorate the quality of education. Recognizing these discrepancies and providing intervention will help to realize the goals of the higher education system.

The Ethiopian higher education system has been operating with a harmonized modular curriculum, which intends to promote active learning approaches and equip students with core competency skills [32–34]. It also consists of continuous assessment and quality assurance mechanisms [35]. Unfortunately, the curriculum is limited in achieving its intended outcome. Studies showed that instructors used traditional lecture-based teaching rather than applying active learning instructions [54,59]. These studies identified the limiting factors as lack of faculty involvement during curriculum development, pedagogical skill gap, poor academic background of students, limited resources, and lack of professional development opportunities that deterred the teaching and learning effectiveness. However, block teaching was acknowledged by instructors and students as value-adding but no longer used due to time constraints, lack of resources, overload, and large classes [37]. Instructors were also not implementing continuous assessment effectively [42]. These studies evidenced that the implementation of a higher education curriculum as it is intended is limited. Furthermore, the implementation of active learning approaches and formative assessment in the higher education system is endangered. However, quality

education is unthinkable without employing scientifically evidenced instructional methods and assessment schemes. There needs to be a bridge to fill the gap between the theoretical assumptions and practical implementations to maintain and improve quality education in higher education. This can help the system produce graduates with adequate knowledge, competency, and skills that fit the demands of the job market.

The literature has witnessed that there are limited professional development opportunities in the higher education system. It is assumed that staff can develop their professional skills through induction, seminars, research, and HDP training. However, this lacks attention and is limited due to inadequate resources and inadequate follow-up [40]. It also indicated a very limited horizontal collaboration for professional development among staff [47]. Therefore, due attention should be given to the staff's professional development scheme to improve their skills, competency, and commitments. The institutions cannot attain their planned objectives without skilled professionals.

Research and community engagement is one of the key priority areas for the higher education system next to quality teaching and learning activities. However, staff are less engaged in research activities due to insufficient research skills, lack of adequate funding, limited resources, and weak research culture [49,50]. Most of the staff conduct research mainly for academic promotion rather than seeking innovation and contributing to knowledge [39]. Thus, impactful research is unthinkable unless some interventions are to be taken.

RQ2. Do public higher education institutions encounter persistent challenges?

As illustrated above, the higher education system in Ethiopia has shown remarkable changes in gross enrollment following the expansion of new universities and diversifying those existing universities. However, it struggles with enduring challenges, which impact the sector significantly. Quality education is one of the main concerns in the system. The federal government established HERQA to ensure the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms, although achieving quality education remains unattainable [40,50,52]. Some of the barriers to quality education include lack of systemic quality assurance, inconsistencies in quality standards among institutions, institutions' lower responsiveness to the HERQA [14], and lack of instructors' commitment due to poor working conditions [48].

Infrastructure is the other key area in the higher education system which needs much more attention. The studies reviewed in this study showed that resource constraints are uncommon in most universities. Specific challenges to most university contexts include insufficient supplies of academic resources such as Information and Communication Technology [ICT] infrastructure, library facilities, laboratory and workshop equipment, poor dormitory services, and inadequate classrooms [40,50]. In line with this, teachers lack appropriate pedagogical skills that affect the execution of the curriculum directly. Despite the curriculum and policy expectations that promote learner-centered approaches, many instructors still stick to their old-fashioned teacher-centered approach, specifically the lecture method [36]. Some other studies also pointed out that most instructors respond that active learning methods like brain-based learning are valuable for students' learning outcomes, but they did not implement it in their instruction [53]. Another study also showed that instructors do not use effective learning approaches and pedagogical skills consistently [41]. Therefore, pedagogical skills are essential to transferring knowledge to the learner as designed in the curriculum. However, the literature identified the pedagogical skill gaps among instructors, less attitude or commitment to use their knowledge, time constraints, and lack of professional development opportunities.

The third inherent challenge of higher education included in this review is graduate unemployment. It is stated that there is a discrepancy between the skills in the curriculum and labor market demands [31]. This implies that the relationship between universities, industries, and business markets is very limited. Graduate unemployment is strongly influenced by age, graduate characteristics, curriculum characteristics, institutional characteristics, and economic and labor market conditions in the country [54]. Therefore, those

stakeholders should work in collaboration closely to fill the skill gaps of graduate students to match the demand of the job market [55].

RQ3. What are emerging initiatives in the public higher education system?

The higher education system is complex and dynamic in nature. Because it should be responsive to the changing demands of the world. Recently, differentiation is one of the reforms introduced to the public higher education system by the MoE. This reform intends to break the earlier uniformity culture of universities. The MoE has categorized universities into four themes: research universities, universities of applied sciences, universities of science and technology, and comprehensive universities [23]. This differentiation is expected to address the inherent tradition of uniformity and program redundancy among Ethiopian universities [56]. Boateng [15] noted that it is a timely intervention to the sector's need for change after years of following similar patterns and trends. Even if differentiation intends to bring positive outcomes, further investigation is necessary to fully understand its strengths, weaknesses, and potential interventions in the process of its implementation. The success of differentiation would depend on the inputs to be invested and how well universities can align their programs with national demands and sustainable goals while recognizing their unique resources and contexts [23].

Comprehensive national exams, both exit exams for undergraduate programs and the National Graduate Admission Test (NGAT) for postgraduate admissions [23], are also new initiatives in the higher education system. Exit exams have been implemented in all undergraduate programs since last year, which aims to maintain the quality of graduates. These exams are assumed to be based on core competencies of the curriculum in each program. Both exams have been administered online in a more centralized manner coordinated by the Ministry. Similarly, NGAT, launched in 2023, provides the same admissions standard for master's programs across all institutions. In contrast, the reports from the Ministry over the last two consecutive years have shown that a very limited number of students pass from the grade 12th national examination, undergraduate exit examination, and NGAT. It is an alarming phenomenon in the education sector regarding its trends, operating system, curricula, educational inputs, and policies in higher education in particular and the whole education system in general. It also casts a shadow over the quality of education and other educational reforms introduced in the system. Moreover, such nationally standardized examinations are expected to play an essential significance in improving educational quality, although it is better to recognize that high-stakes exams cannot guarantee quality alone. In addition, continuous monitoring and evaluation of those new initiatives should be conducted to use them as input for the improvement of the education system in higher education. Scientific investigations need to be made to collect feedback about its implementation process, limitations, and contributions to the sector.

Internationalization and partnerships are also essential components of the higher education system. Studies witnessed the potential benefits of international collaborations, particularly in enhancing the research capacity and global standing of Ethiopian universities [57,58]. However, the two partners' (local and foreign institutions) misalignment of their interests and subtle management is the challenge. Tamrat and Tefera [30] explained that HE encounters a lack of systematic management of partnerships, specifically, many institutions struggle with resource limitations and unclear strategic directions. To maximize the benefits of international collaborations, Ethiopian universities need strategic planning, frameworks, and policies for internationalization. International partnerships and collaborations are valuable for improving institutional profiles, experience, accessing resources, and executing large-scale research. It is highly valuable for those institutions that suffer from the several persistent challenges explained above. Therefore, Ethiopian higher education should involve designing internationalization policies and creating structured mechanisms for collaboration, including student exchanges, joint research, and staff development programs [58].

This study also has some limitations. Due to the absence of an updated system from the MoE, this paper presents undergraduate enrollment trends only up to the 2017/2018

academic year. The Ethiopian MoE has not provided updated undergraduate enrollment figures for the years following 2017/2018. This lack of available data may indicate underlying issues within the education system, such as inadequate data management practices or resource constraints, which could hinder effective planning and policy development. The content of this study is derived from only four main sources, such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Web of Science. Other sources may also offer valuable insights.

6. Conclusions

Generally, this study provides a comprehensive picture of the functioning, challenges, and emerging initiatives in the public higher education system in Ethiopia. It applies a narrative approach to synthesize the findings of those empirical investigations in the area. The articles were searched from databases mainly Scopus, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Web of Science. The selected papers were analyzed and synthesized thematically and presented in a narrative way.

Higher education has a critical role in socio-economic development. In its overall operating system, public universities have three main target programs: teaching/training, research, and community services. The MoE oversees the overall education system in the country. It is evidenced that access to higher education showed relatively higher achievements in establishing new universities, and expansion and the gross enrollment rate improved for the past three decades. However, the expansion is accompanied by notable challenges, particularly quality and relevance, which become immediate concerns. The findings of the review also showed that the higher education system is influenced by centralized governance, rigid structure, poor management, political interference, and less linkage with industries. A modular curriculum has been introduced and implemented with the assumption that it could promote an effective teaching and learning process to produce quality graduates. Despite the policy documents and educational laws of the land, research findings expect to apply learner-centered approaches, formative assessments, and improve students' learning outcomes, but fail to achieve its intent. Some findings stated that most of the instructors were dissatisfied with their working environment and showed less commitment. It is also evidenced that the instructors who are working in public universities in Ethiopia are expected to be engaged in research activities, although most of them are less engaged in research activities.

The findings of this study indicate that the operating system of higher education could not achieve its purpose due to persistent challenges. Most universities are suffering from several challenges such as lack of infrastructure, technology, finance, staff profile, poor governance, and poor-quality services and facilities, which are bottlenecks to achieving their intended goals. Students and teachers were not satisfied with the facilities and services of their institution. The study also identified inherent problems in curriculum development, the teaching and learning process, assessment, research execution, and providing quality services. Partly, this is attributed to the pedagogical and research skill gaps of the instructors. The public higher education system is also challenged with a higher rate of unemployment among graduates. Those graduate students lack the required skills to cope with the demands of the job market due to misaligned curricula, less-effective teaching and learning strategies, and a lack of strong linkage between universities and industries.

The MoE introduced university differentiation as part of the educational reform in line with the national educational roadmap. The public universities are differentiated into four themes in order to change the uniformity tradition in the HE system. The ministry also initiated a comprehensive national exit exam for the undergraduate program and NGAT for postgraduate students. Unfortunately, the results of students in all of those national examinations were not encouraging, which raises concern for the education system in general and higher education in particular. On the other hand, international partnerships and collaborations are also key areas of those higher education institutions, even though they are not guided wisely. Those initiatives broadly reflect the aim to enhance

educational quality, improve performance, and contribute to sustainable developmental goals at the regional or global level. It is vital to constantly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these reforms in order to ensure continued progress and improvement in this sector. Simultaneously, intermediate and long-term interventions need to be designed in conjunction with those comprehensive national examinations to bring better outcomes.

Therefore, addressing the concerns and challenges observed in higher education in Ethiopia will require a re-examination of the higher education governance structure, rethinking the curriculum development and its implementation, greater investment in budget and resources, ensuring quality standards, rethinking a new professional development scheme, designing a well-defined framework for the university–industry linkage, managing international partnerships strategically, and monitoring and evaluating differentiation and national exit exam and NGAT outcomes. Due emphasis needs to be given to margining initiatives of the higher education system to be more responsive to the dynamic needs of society. It is essential to invest in the infrastructure and facilities of public universities to improve the quality of the working environment and, in turn, enhance quality education. Finally, further investigations need to be conducted on the higher education system in the country to focus on integrating technology and innovation in higher education, as well as to what extent those emerging initiatives are working and contributing to the alignment of public university missions with sustainable development.

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