

# Ethiopia: Infusing Local Perspectives in Internationalization Policy

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## Abstract

With the development of its internationalization policy in 2020, Ethiopia has joined the list of a number of African countries that have such a policy. Aimed at comprehensive internationalization, the document's goals and components manifest conscious efforts to infuse local perspectives and dimensions in the policy. Implementation will require more effort in terms of addressing past deficiencies, emerging challenges, and the ambitious components of the new policy.

In Ethiopia, the internationalization of higher education (IHE) has been recognized as an important undertaking in promoting teaching and research collaboration, faculty and student mobility, mobilization of international resources, and enhancement of academic quality and standards.

The sector has been functioning without a national policy showing how IHE should be planned, directed, supported, and implemented. With the issuance of Ethiopia's first ever such policy in 2020, the principles, rationales, and focus areas upon which IHE efforts are set have been clearly outlined. As argued below, deliberate efforts have been made to infuse local interests and system advantages in the policy.

## Goals

The policy identifies academic, economic, political, and sociocultural rationales as the four broader goals for engaging in IHE. The academic rationales, identified as the main ones, focus on improving quality, relevance, knowledge creation, and advancement in the sector. The emphasis on academic rationales is a clear indication of how internationalization can be used as a critical tool to address deficiencies of the higher education system in Ethiopia and perhaps in most developing countries as well.

The economic rationales of the policy are new and envisage income generation, using activities such as quality programs, scientific patents, and innovations. If pursued with excessive commercial interest, this can have negative repercussions and suggests the need for mechanisms addressing this concern.

The political rationales focus on using IHE as a component of Ethiopia's soft diplomatic power and enhancing peaceful coexistence in the region and beyond, while the sociocultural rationales focus on promoting cultural understanding and exchange with the outside world and addressing global challenges and the Sustainable Development Goals. These rationales are relevant given Ethiopia's role as the seat of the African Union and its commitment toward addressing national, regional, and global challenges. Main policy directions and strategies are outlined below.

## Internationalization of Research and International Cooperation

The policy emphasizes that research and international cooperation should enhance the introduction of new approaches to teaching and learning, the development of curricula, transmission of knowledge, acquisition and utilization of facilities and equipment, and improving the quality of education—which again corresponds to the academic rationales identified above.

Furthermore, the policy recognizes the need for creating mechanisms facilitating access, for international scientists, to research opportunities and facilities in Ethiopia. In addition to involving the Ethiopian diaspora in the internationalization of research and international cooperation, emphasis is given to prioritizing relations with the Global South, which has always been a neglected area given the sector's dominant engagement with the Global North.

## Institution and Program Mobility

The new policy direction reaffirms Ethiopia's commitment toward ensuring the relevance of foreign programs offered in the country and deterring unscrupulous providers. Unlike other countries where such providers enjoy free rein and cause havoc, since 2012,

Ethiopia has been known for instituting a regulatory mechanism to control transnational education, which is maintained in the new policy.

The policy also stipulates that programs offered abroad by Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs) should be approved by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (now Education and Training Authority). This has not been the case in the past, despite the presence of some Ethiopian providers operating in neighboring countries. Equal consideration is given to recognition of foreign qualifications and authentication of Ethiopian qualifications.

The policy further suggests the need for establishing an information and data management system on IHE with appropriate structures, budget, and resources. This has been one of the most common gaps in the system, both at the national and institutional levels.

### **Mobility of People**

Recent information from UNESCO's Institute of Statistics shows that the number of outbound students from Ethiopia stood at 7,626, dispersed in smaller numbers across many countries. The United States is the most popular destination, accounting for 29 percent of enrollments among Ethiopian students seeking to graduate abroad. Ethiopia is among the countries with the highest number of Erasmus staff and students going to Europe. Within the Asian continent, India is one of the main scholarship providers to Ethiopian students. Turkey and China have lately joined the list as popular foreign destinations.

The 2019–2020 data from the ministry of education indicates that there were 1,816 foreign students pursuing bachelors (76 percent), masters (22 percent), and PhD degrees (2 percent) in Ethiopian HEIs. A significant number of foreign students in Ethiopian HEIs are attracted by scholarships offered to refugees from countries such as Congo Brazzaville, Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Yemen.

To facilitate academic exchanges and enhance the success of inbound students, the new policy emphasizes the need to coordinate national immigration requirements and study and work permit procedures for foreigners working at Ethiopian HEIs, giving priority to nationals from neighboring countries and the Global South. Changes in this direction are expected to address the hitherto lack of organized assistance provided by the government to outbound and inbound students who require various types of help to facilitate their mobility. However, implementation will be dependent on the level of cooperation received from pertinent government organizations and ministries that are responsible for, and can facilitate, the task.

The policy also encourages the participation of foreign nationals and the Ethiopian diaspora in activities such as knowledge transfer, knowledge generation, and capacity building. Perhaps a reflection of Ethiopia's ongoing commitment to refugee education, the policy similarly recognizes refugees' access to higher education, based on the stipulations laid down in the national refugee proclamation.

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### **Internationalization at Home (IaH)**

The new policy emphasizes the need to bring globally focused content and perspectives into the classroom and coursework, as well as in learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of programs of study through the development of appropriate curricula. It underscores the need to align students' mastery of indigenous knowledge with the development of global competences and knowledge through IaH.

HEIs are encouraged to ensure faculty and student appreciation of international diversity and intercultural exchange. In addition to the curriculum, the policy takes foreign language learning as one mechanism to promote IaH and encourages teaching foreign languages. These aspirations appear to be logical, given the sector's broader objectives of creating a higher education system that aspires to train "internationally competitive graduates."

### **Implementation Challenges**

Ethiopia's new IHE policy reflects conscious efforts to develop plans and strategies that address local needs and aspirations. A rare exercise in the context of Africa, the policy provides a practical model to advance internationalization in lower-income countries.

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Aimed at comprehensive internationalization, the policy can have immediate impact by setting a strategic direction for Ethiopian HEIs, whose internationalization efforts lacked clear guidance in the past. It can also promote a synergy between institutional, national, regional, and global strategies and procedures. However, the immediate translation of policy aims into actions may not be easy, given past achievements, emerging challenges, and the ambitious plans envisaged. Over the past few years, the internationalization activities of Ethiopian HEIs have slumbered as a result of the multifarious impacts of COVID-19 that needed to be addressed. This is further compounded by the current civil unrest in the country, which continues to affect overall institutional operations. The number of HEIs that have developed their own internationalization policy and strategy based on the national policy is still vanishingly small.

While national policies will always be useful in navigating the IHE maze, implementation will remain demanding, given the local challenges and the historical trajectory of internationalization in an unequal world, where attending to local needs and priorities may be fraught with a variety of complexities and frustrations, requiring careful planning, negotiations, and, at times, compromises. ▲