Exploring neoliberal influences on higher education curriculum reform: Insights from Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of neoliberal policy agendas on curriculum reform at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. Using Legitimation Code Theory, it examines how the neoliberal policy agenda prioritizes vocational knowledge and job-oriented skills, often marginalizing critical thinking and holistic learning. Through a qualitative case study approach, the research analyzed higher education policy documents, Bahir Dar University's strategic plan, and interview data. Purposive sampling was employed to select nine experienced academics as study participants, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results revealed a significant shift toward vocational knowledge and increasing disparities, both of which reflect the influence of neoliberal policies. The study recommends re-evaluating curriculum reform to ensure that workforce preparation encompasses critical engagement, social equity, and civic responsibility. It calls for curriculum frameworks that integrate vocational knowledge with liberal arts and critical thinking to prepare students not only for professional success but also for lifelong personal and societal fulfillment.

Introduction

Neoliberal policies have significantly shaped higher education in both developed and developing countries, emphasizing economic liberalization, privatization, and market-driven approaches. These policies prioritize efficiency, accountability, and alignment with labor market needs, leading to concerns about a narrowing curriculum that emphasizes economic goals over critical thinking and comprehensive education (Giroux, 2014; Savage, 2017).

The shift towards vocational and economic purpose has brought debates over the "false choices" between employability and intellectual development, vocational and academic

education, or practical and theoretical knowledge (Shay, 2013; 2014). At the heart of these debates, there are fundamental questions regarding the nature and value of knowledge. Scholars of education, particularly those influenced by social realism, argue for access to "powerful knowledge" i.e. theoretical and abstract knowledge that enables deeper understanding and meaningful engagement with the world (Young, 2008). Due to absence of this knowledge, education may risk perpetuating social inequalities (Wheelahan, 2010). Though, much of the studies on knowledge and curriculum have focused on the schooling sector, a growing body of research now explores the relationship between knowledge and curriculum in higher education (Muller, 2009; Shay, 2014).

Neoliberalism has reshaped higher education curricula worldwide, prioritizing economic growth, employability, and practical skills over broader intellectual and social goals (Ball, 2017; Giroux, 2014). Institutions such as the World Bank and International monetary Fund (IMF) have promoted market-driven reforms in public education systems, including in Ethiopia (Asabu, 2017; Tebeje, 2013; Teklu, 2016).

Globally, studies have shown that neoliberal policies lead to the commodification of education, marginalizing the humanities and social sciences, while prioritizing disciplines like Science, Technnology, Engineering, and Mathemeatics (STEM) for their economic utility, which are perceived as more important for market competitiveness (Giroux, 2014; Kallio & Haring, 2021; Shin, 2022). In UK, higher education reforms increasingly emphasize global economic demands, sidelining disciplines that foster critical thinking and social critique (Jones & Gough, 2020). Similarly, in South Korea, Shin (2022) documented that reforms favoring STEM have minimized support for the humanities, reflecting broader international trend. In United States, curriculum shifts toward labor market alignment have reduced opportunities for intellectual engagement and civic education (Brown, 2021).

Though, previous research has indicated the impacts of neoliberal policies on higher education systems worldwide—focusing on trends such as the commodification of knowledge and a narrow emphasis on economic outcomes (Perkins, 2019; Savage, 2017)—limited attention is given to studies specifically addressing these dynamics within Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the context of Ethiopian higher education.

Context of the Study

In Ethiopia, neoliberal trends have increasingly influenced the focus on vocational skills and economic productivity, particularly since the late 1990s. The government has introduced policies focusing on expanding access to higher education while aligning curricula with national development goals and labor market demands (Molla, 2021; Teferra, 2019). These policies have directed Ethiopian higher education toward workforce development, emphasizing a 70:30 ratio of STEM fields to social sciences, in response to the requirements of a rapidly growing market economy (MOE, 2018). This shift reflects a global trend in which educational institutions are viewed as engines of economic growth, often at the expense of broader educational values (Giroux, 2014).

Within this framework, curriculum reforms tend to prioritize fields that are perceived as directly enhancing economic productivity—such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics—while downplaying the significance of the humanities and social sciences,

which are often regarded as less relevant to economic advancement (Giroux, 2014; Savage, 2017). The increasing emphasis on employability and technical training in Ethiopian higher education policies highlights this trend frequently sidelining critical inquiry, creativity, and local cultural contexts (Molla, 2021; Teferra, 2019). This reflects a global pattern of marginalizing diverse knowledge production.

Moreover, Ethiopian higher education policy documents demand institutions to cultivate a workforce with the skills necessary for developing national economic development (MOE, 2018). There is an increasing focus on entrepreneurship courses that aim to encourage graduates to become job creators rather than job seekers (MOE, 2018; MOSHE, 2019). However, recent research disputes the assumption that expanding higher education directly correlates with economic growth in Ethiopia, revealing a weak connection between the two (Tsegaw, 2023).

Among Ethiopia's leading higher education institutions, Bahir Dar University (BDU) exemplifies both the challenges and opportunities presented by neoliberal reforms. At BDU, neoliberal initiatives reflect global and local trends, with the curriculum increasingly aligned with STEM and technical fields, driven by economic imperatives, while the humanities and social sciences often face marginalization (MOE, 2018). While this aligns with international findings (Shin, 2019), the Ethiopian context introduces specific challenges, such as maintaining academic quality amidst rapid higher education expansion and addressing local community needs (Santos, 2020; Teferra, 2019).

As BDU endeavors to revise its curriculum in response to market demands, it confronts the complex challenge of reconciling economic imperatives with a commitment to academic integrity and social responsibility. Research indicates that while strides have been made to enhance student employability through curriculum revisions, there is often an emphasis on technical skills over critical perspectives (Molla, 2021; Sara et al, 2024). Faculty members frequently express concerns regarding the implications of a market-driven curriculum on academic freedom and the diversity of knowledge (Adams & Cooke, 2022; Amsler & Bean, 2021). This creates a tension between aligning curriculum reforms with economic objectives and fostering an inclusive educational environment that values diverse knowledge forms, including local cultural perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches.

While some studies have examined aspects of Ethiopian higher education reforms—such as privatization (Wondwossen, 2008), cost-sharing (Yizengaw, 2007), and competency-based education (Melkam, 2024)—limited attention has been given to the specific impacts of the neoliberal policy agenda on the knowledge base of university curricula. Although research conducted by Woldehanna and Tesfaye (2014) and Jimma and Tarekegn (2016) has explored curriculum reform in Ethiopia, the influence of neoliberalism on the selection of theories, disciplines, and learning outcomes has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

Addressing this gap is important, as neoliberal policies often prioritize economic outcomes, marginalizing the central role of education in cultivating critical thinking, social equity, and cultural understanding. In-depth investigation into how neoliberal ideologies shape curriculum content at BDU—specifically regarding the prioritization of certain theories and disciplines while marginalizing others—can provide important insights for designing a more holistic and inclusive educational curriculum that balances economic demands with broader educational objectives.

To guide this study, the following research questions were formulated: (1) how do neoliberal policies shape the language and values presented in higher education curricula? (2) How do educational policies interpret the knowledge base of higher education curriculum reform? (3) Which disciplinary perspectives and expert voices are emphasized or marginalized in higher education curriculum?

Theoretical Framework: Legitimation Code Theory

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), developed by Maton (2014), is a multi-disciplinary framework drawing from philosophy, linguistics, physics, anthropology, and cultural studies, and is primarily influenced by the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein. Maton built on Bourdieu's "field theory" and Bernstein's "Code theory," especially Bourdieu's concept of a "sociological eye," which encourages a holistic view of the social world beyond immediate fragmentation. Maton (2016) describes this approach as shifting from viewing phenomena as separate empirical entities to understanding them as realizations of underlying organizing principles.

Studies are exploring and shaping diverse social fields of practice, including law (Martin et al. 2013), theatre (Hay, 2014), armed forces (Thomson, 2014), and higher education curriculum (Shay, 2013; 2014). It thus holds open the possibility of generating an integrated account of society.

This study uses LCT to analyze curriculum reform at Bahir Dar University amidst neoliberal pressures. Unlike neoliberal frameworks, which focus on economic efficiency and market competition, LCT emphasizes the legitimation of knowledge and knowers, offering a deeper understanding of how curriculum reforms impact the value of different knowledge forms and the identification of legitimate knowers. LCT addresses a gap left by neoliberal perspectives, which overlook the complexities of knowledge production in education. It also highlights tensions between global neoliberal values and local knowledge systems, revealing how curriculum reforms may prioritize employability and standardized knowledge, marginalizing indigenous traditions. By focusing on these tensions, LCT offers a more comprehensive view of how neoliberal ideologies shape education, including the exclusion of marginalized knowers and the preference for theoretical knowledge (Maton, 2014).

The present study investigates the impact of neoliberal education policies on higher education curriculum reform in Ethiopia, using LCT to examine how these policies shape the knowledge base of the curricula. LCT helps address the "knowledge blindness" gap and informs policy-making in Ethiopian higher education. Despite the growing need for curriculum reform in Ethiopia, limited research has been conducted on the influence of neoliberal policies using LCT, making this study a valuable contribution to the field.

Legitimation Code Theory encompasses five dimensions: Specialization, Semantics, Autonomy, Temporality, and Density. However, this research is based on Specialization and Semantic codes. Semantics analyzes the logical structure of the curriculum to understand its meaning and coherence, while specialization focuses on the ideal learner, including the knowledge, skills, and values graduates should have. These principles are translated into codes to identify stronger and weaker manifestations. Shay (2013) used semantic codes to

distinguish four curriculum modalities: practical, vocational/professional, theoretical, and generic.

Semantic gravity describes the relationship between curriculum and its context. Stronger semantic gravity (SG+) ties curriculum to real-world practice, while weaker semantic gravity (SG-) connects it to theoretical ideas. Semantic density reflects the conceptual depth, with stronger semantic density (SD+) indicating integrated, generalized concepts, and weaker semantic density (SD-) representing fragmented or loosely connected ideas (Maton, 2014).

This study uses semantic code to explore how higher education academics perceive curriculum reforms and their underlying knowledge bases. Semantic code, consisting of semantic gravity and density, creates a semantic plane with four curriculum modalities: "practical" (SG+, SD-), "theoretical" (SG-, SD+), professional fields (SG+, SD+), and "generic" curricula (SG-, SD-), reflecting transferable skills. Each modality represents a distinct educational approach.

Figure 1

Semantic Codes of Legitimation
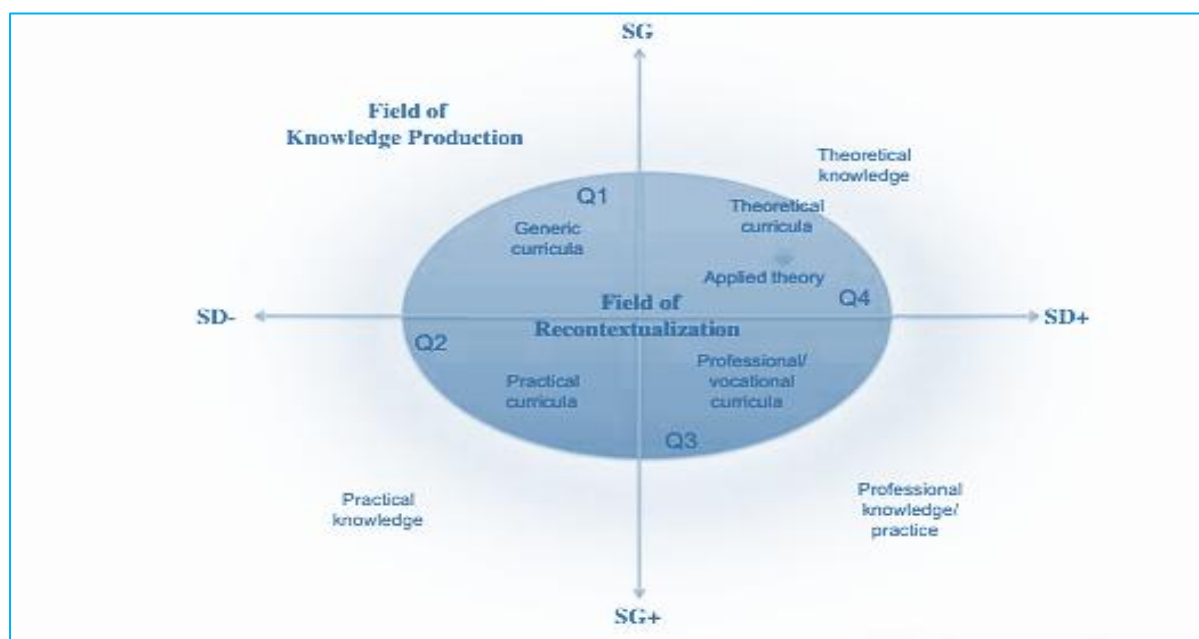
Source: Shay (2013, p.572)

Specialization codes, as defined by Maton (2016), analyze practices based on their focus on objects (epistemic relations, ER) or subjects (social relations, SR). Knowledge codes (ER+, SR-) emphasize specialized knowledge, knower codes (ER-, SR+) focus on the actor's attributes, elite codes (ER+, SR+) require both, and relativist codes (ER-, SR-) are more flexible. These codes help examine the "rules of the game" in the context of neoliberal education policies and curriculum reforms, determining whether knowledge-code, knower-code, or elite-code dispositions dominate. Shifts in subjects may alter the dominant code, influencing educational practices.

Methods

Research Approach

This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine curriculum reform at Bahir Dar University. The approach is ideal for exploring complex phenomena in their real-life context (Yin, 2014). It investigates how internal factors (e.g., university policies, faculty expertise, student needs) and external neoliberal influences (e.g., global education trends, economic pressures) shape the reform process. A qualitative approach is used to explore participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to their actions (Creswell, 2013), providing deep insights into institutional practices and the complexities of reform.

Research Design

This study adopts a single-case embedded case study design, suitable for exploring complex phenomena within a specific context (Yin, 2014). This qualitative design captures subjective experiences and institutional dynamics, offering rich insights into curriculum reform (Creswell, 2013), while the embedded design allows analysis of sub-units like faculty views, policies, and documents (Yin, 2014).

Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to select the university, academic units, and individuals involved in the research. Bahir Dar University was chosen as the case due to its pivotal role in Ethiopian higher education, particularly during a time of ongoing curriculum reforms shaped by broader neoliberal influences.

This university was particularly selected based on several key justifications: First, it occupies a central role in Ethiopia's higher education sector, playing an active part in shaping key national education policies. This includes contributions to the Ethiopian Education and Training Roadmap (MOE, 2018) with four academic participants, the Higher Education Curriculum Framework (MOSHE, 2019) with two academics, and the Harmonized Academic Policy for Ethiopian Public Higher Education Institutions (MOE, 2013), which involved two participants are some of them. Additionally, the development process for the Higher Education Curriculum Framework was chaired by one of BDU's representatives. Over time, the university has undergone significant curriculum changes, largely driven by national educational reforms and broader neoliberal trends (Tebeje, 2013), particularly as it currently moving towards autonomous institution, one of neoliberal policy agendas of higher education reform. And all these gave me access to relevant individuals directly involved in these processes, ensuring the availability of valuable data for the study.

Second, the practical considerations of access and convenience are crucial in selecting BDU for this study. As university staff, the researchers have easy access to a wealth of institutional documents and statistical data that would be difficult to obtain otherwise. This proximity makes the research more feasible. Additionally, it is assumed that BDU has the resources and capacity to implement proactive reforms, further justifying its selection as a case study.

The university's diverse range of academic disciplines—including social sciences, education, and humanities—provides a unique opportunity to analyze curriculum reforms across different faculties, illuminating the ideological and pedagogical debates that shape these changes. Additionally, located in the Amhara region, Bahir Dar serves as a major educational hub, attracting students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity further enhances the relevance of the study, as it allows for an examination of the broader effects of curriculum reform on Ethiopia's higher education system.

This study focused on the Colleges of Social Sciences, Education, and the Faculty of Humanities at Bahir Dar University, as these units play a key role in debates on curriculum reform under neoliberal pressures. Unlike STEM, they critically address education's societal role, making them central to understanding the ideological impacts of neoliberalism (Savage, 2017). STEM faculties are excluded because neoliberal pressures more heavily impact the humanities and social sciences, which prioritize critical thinking and intellectual inquiry over market alignment. Hence, this study aims to examine how neoliberalism disrupts these disciplines, revealing tensions between academic freedom and employability-driven reforms.

Nine academics from three academic units were purposefully selected to ensure data saturation, including four involved in national higher education reform and one as BDU's Executive Academic Officer. The group, diverse in demographics, consisted of eight males and one female, all with administrative experience in roles such as department heads, deans, or directors. Seven hold doctoral degrees; one has a master's, and one doctoral candidate. The group includes a professor, three associate professors, four assistant professors, and one lecturer, offering a broad perspective on curriculum reform at BDU.

The participants in this study were senior academics with over 20 years of experience, some reaching up to 40 years, in higher education. Senior academic members were selected for their extensive expertise in curriculum reform and policy development, having been involved in key decision-making and shaping neoliberal reforms at BDU. Their long-term involvement provides a critical understanding of the historical, strategic, and external influences on curriculum changes. Their leadership roles and experience navigating complex neoliberal reforms ensured valuable insights, while excluding young faculty can help avoid skewing the data toward more individual or localized experiences, ensuring a more institutional and policy-level focus. Some groups, like curriculum committee members, the president, and students, were excluded as their roles in curriculum reform are indirect.

Data Gathering Methods

The data gathering methods used in the present study comprised semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Below is a brief description of each of these methods.

Semi-structured Interview

The study employed semi-structured interviews, which provide a balance of consistency and flexibility, allowing for predefined questions along with follow-up inquiries based on participants' responses (Yin, 2014). This method is well-suited for qualitative research, offering rich, context-sensitive insights into participants' experiences, especially on complex topics like curriculum reform (Creswell, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff to explore key issues such as neoliberal pressure, the emphasis on vocational knowledge, disciplinary disparities, and the focus on STEM, the hierarchy of knowledge, and the impact of the dynamic on faculty. Interview sessions lasted between 50 to 70 minutes and were conducted one-on-one. Audio recordings were used to capture the interviews for accurate transcription and analysis.

Document Analysis

In this study, document analysis was used to complement interview data by providing a policy perspective on curriculum reform at BDU (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). It explored key issues like neoliberal influences, vocational knowledge, and the STEM-social sciences tension. Five relevant documents were analyzed based on their relevance to curriculum reform, including policy papers and strategic plans focused on efficiency, accountability, employability, and post-1990s reforms related to privatization and economic growth. The reviewed documents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Documents Reviewed in this Study

Name of Policy Document	Date of Publication	Publisher	Purpose
Education and training policy	2023	MOE	Reform the education sector /curriculum /towards practice oriented approach.
Ethiopian Higher Education Policy and Strategy	2020	MOSHE	Transforming higher education sector so that it advances the nation in socio-economic, political, scientific and technological developments.
The Ethiopian Higher Education Curriculum Framework	2019	MOSHE	To realize expectations of Ethiopian HEIs development of world-work related educational curriculum /programs.
The Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap	2018	MOE	Reform the education sector in accordance with the national vision and national development goal.
BDU Strategic Plan	2020	BDU	Producing skilled graduates to meet national labor market needs, fostering community engagement, and advancing problem-solving technology transfer.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine interview transcripts and policy documents on curriculum reform at BDU. Semantic coding identified neoliberal terms like

"employability" and "outcome-based education," revealing the values shaping the curriculum. Specialization coding explored the representation of disciplines, highlighting the prioritization of STEM over humanities and how knowledge is legitimized through industry or academic standards. Related codes were organized into themes that captured key issues and trends in curriculum reform. Member checking validated findings by involving participants in reviewing and confirming interpretations, enhancing the study's credibility and accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by research advisors, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage, upholding participants' rights and research integrity.

Results

Three key themes, along their sub-themes emerged from the analysis. The major themes are vocational focus, sidelining of theoretical knowledge, and disciplinary disparity in higher education.

Shift towards Vocational Education

The analysis of Ethiopian higher education policy and interview data reveals a strong shift toward vocational education, especially in STEM and business, creating tensions in curricular priorities. Using Legitimation Code Theory, the study shows that key policy documents (BDU, 2020; MOE, 2018; MOE, 2023) emphasize practical, market-driven knowledge with strong semantic gravity (SG+) and weak semantic density (SD−), prioritizing job-ready skills over deep theoretical understanding. For instance, the Ethiopian Higher Education Curriculum Framework emphasizes:

> Higher education has to provide programmes including different field of studies that emphasis the application of experiential learning to the real world engagement. This makes major contribution to graduates developing their skills and attributes for employability (MOSHE, 2019, p.9).

In addition, the Ethiopian Higher Education Policy and Strategy states: "Higher education institutions shall give due emphasis to the development of science and technology as part of their missions" (MOSHE, 2020, p.11), emphasizing the priority of STEM fields over broader intellectual disciplines. Similarly, the BDU Strategic Plan advocates for: "Introducing new programs demanded in the market" (BDU, 2020, p.7), signaling a curriculum increasingly shaped by labor market trends rather than academic traditions or theoretical inquiry.

The excerpts emphasize the need for higher education to align with labor market demands, focusing on experiential learning to enhance graduates' employability (MOSHE, 2019). Bahir Dar University aims to produce graduates with the knowledge, skills, and

attitudes needed to meet national labor market requirements and boost global competitiveness (BDU, 2020). Additionally, Ethiopia's Higher Education Policy expects future students to be competent, entrepreneurial, and capable of contributing as job creators, policy-makers, and business leaders (MOSHE, 2020).

In contrast, the interview data reveals a tension, pointing towards a need for curricula that balance vocational training with intellectual and theoretical foundations. The interviewees express concerns about the overemphasis on vocational disciplines, particularly the marginalization of humanities, social sciences, and education, which are seen as vital for developing well-rounded, critically thinking individuals.

The interview responses, especially from Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 7, suggest a preference for curricula characterized by SG+ and SD+ modalities, where there is a stronger connection between knowledge and its context (SG+) and a deeper conceptual and theoretical understanding (SD+). These interviewees advocate for a curriculum that not only prepares students for specific job roles but also equips them with the intellectual tools to understand broader societal and cultural issues. For example, Interviewee 3 metaphorically stated the following:

> The growing focus on fields like accounting is putting all its eggs in one basket, threatening to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The humanities, education, and social sciences are at risk of being left out in the cold, their value turned upside down, like a tree with its roots in the air (Interviewee 3).

This metaphor highlights the risks of neglecting theoretical disciplines, suggesting they provide essential foundational knowledge and critical thinking skills crucial for a balanced education. Without these insights, students may struggle to analyze complex problems and innovate effectively, highlighting the need for a curriculum that values both theoretical and practical learning.

Interviewee 7 further critiqued the vocational focus, stating:

> The shift towards vocational training and market-oriented subjects is leaving the humanities and social sciences in a precarious position. It's as if we are cutting off the branches of a tree because we only value its fruit. These fields contribute to a deeper understanding of society and culture, which are essential for fostering informed and responsible citizens (Interviewee 7).

Similarly, Interviewee 9, an Associate Professor at the college of education, expressed concern over the gap between vocational training and academic rigor. He noted:

> While vocational training equips students with practical skills, many of them are underprepared in terms of academic theory and critical thinking, which makes it difficult for them to succeed in advanced coursework and research projects (Interviewee 9).

This critique suggests that vocational education may effectively address immediate market needs. However, this focus risks creating an imbalanced curriculum. Consequently, it neglects the broader and richer understanding of human society that theoretical disciplines offer.

The integration of policy and interview data reveals a tension between vocational, market-driven curricula (SG+, SD−) and more theoretical, intellectually rich education (SG−, SD+). While policies emphasize employability in STEM and business, interviewees advocate for a balanced approach that includes knower codes to foster critical thinking and social awareness. Faculties warn that overemphasizing practical skills risks neglecting broader intellectual development. They call for a holistic curriculum that blends job readiness with deep, critical engagement, ensuring higher education in Ethiopia remains both economically and socially relevant.

Sidelining of Theoretical Knowledge

The shift toward vocational, competency-based education in Ethiopian higher education reflects neoliberal reforms that prioritize practical, job-specific skills over theoretical knowledge. Using LCT, this analysis highlights how policy documents (MOE, 2018; MOE, 2023; MOSHE, 2019) emphasize strong semantic gravity (SG+) and weak semantic density (SD−), promoting workforce-ready competencies like technology and communication, while sidelining broader conceptual and theoretical learning.

This reflects a high semantic gravity (SG+) orientation, as the knowledge is intended to be applicable to specific job roles, with less emphasis on conceptual depth. Similarly, the low semantic density (SD-) approach indicates a preference for straightforward, skill-based education with limited theoretical engagement or complex conceptual frameworks.For example, the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap states:

> Shifting from the traditional knowledge-based curriculum (SG-, SD+) to a new competency-based curriculum focuses on identifying professional and vocational skills, job-specific capabilities, and transferable skills (MOE, 2018, p.56).

The Ethiopian higher education curriculum framework also reflects similar sentiments by stating the following:

> In order to realize competencies such as technology, rational thinking, communication, lifelong learning, environmental responsiveness, workmanship/ employability skill, & national pride higher education has to provide programmes including different field of studies that emphasis the application of experiential learning to the real world engagement (MOSHE, 2019, p.13).

Additionally, the Ethiopia education and training policy raised concerns about the curriculum's heavy reliance on theoretical content. It highlights a significant shortcoming in relation to the absence of practice-based or competency-based education, which is crucial for effective learning (MOE, 2023).

Using LCT, the Ethiopian higher education curriculum shift from theoretical to competency-based education reflects a move from knowledge codes (ER+, SR-) to knower codes (ER-, SR+). The traditional curriculum emphasized specialized knowledge, with weak real-world connections (SG-, SD+). The new focus on professional and vocational skills strengthens semantic gravity (SG+), making learning more contextually relevant, while semantic density (SD-) becomes weaker, prioritizing practical skills over abstract knowledge.

This reform aims to align education with real-world competencies, emphasizing both practical experience and theoretical knowledge.

However, interviewees express concern that this shift towards vocational education at the expense of theoretical knowledge undermines the holistic development of students. For example, Interviewee 4 from the College of Social Sciences critiques the narrowing focus of the curriculum, emphasizing the need for a balance between theory and practice. He notes that theoretical knowledge provides the conceptual foundation for understanding practical applications, which is essential for long-term success and critical thinking in any profession. This perspective reflects the need for (SG+, SD+) knowledge, which connects context-specific knowledge with broader conceptual frameworks, allowing students to critically engage with real-world problems and understand the underlying principles guiding their practices.

The contrast between the policy documents' (SG+, SD-) focus and the interviewees' critique points to the importance of (SG+,SD+) knowledge in balancing vocational training with the development of deeper conceptual understanding. SG+ (context-specific knowledge) is essential for applying theoretical concepts to real-world situations, while SD+ (complex conceptual knowledge) is necessary for fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation in any discipline.

Interviewee 8, from the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies, stressed that practical skills are essential but need to be grounded in theoretical knowledge to ensure students understand the principles guiding their practice. Specifically,he stated the following:

> The current focus on vocational skills is important, but it's equally crucial to maintain a strong theoretical base. Without it, students may develop practical abilities without understanding the underlying principles that guide those practices. A balance between theory and practice is essential for producing well-rounded professionals (Interviewee 8).

This statement underscores the importance of balancing SG+ (practical, job-specific knowledge) with SD+ (theoretical knowledge) in education. Achieving this balance is essential for cultivating well-rounded professionals who possess both practical skills and a strong theoretical foundation.

In the meanwhile, policy documents emphasize a knowledge-driven approach(ER+, SR-), focusing on the vocational skills needed in the labor market. This orientation reflects an emphasis on specialized knowledge (ER+) that is designed to be applied in specific job roles, with limited emphasis on the role of the knower (SR-) or the development of critical, reflective skills. The policy frameworks advocate for practical competencies, such as technology and employability skills, which are seen as directly contributing to the economy and labor market needs.

However, the interviewees emphasize the importance of the knower-driven approach (ER-, SR+), which is essential for fostering critical, reflective thinkers who can apply their practical skills in complex, evolving contexts. Interviewee 4, for instance, argues that theoretical knowledge allows students to understand the underlying principles of their work, fostering critical engagement and long-term adaptability. This approach highlights the role of

the knower in not just acquiring skills but in developing the intellectual tools to understand and adapt to changing circumstances. Interviewee 4 mentioned:

> Higher education traditionally focused on transmitting knowledge, but neoliberal policies now prioritize practical problem-solving and profit maximization. Aristotle's 'Doctrine of the Golden Mean' advocates a balance between theory and practice, which current curricula often lack (Interviewee 4).

The ER+ and SR+ approach, as advocated by interviewees, emphasizes the importance of theoretical engagement in education. This approach empowers students to critically analyze and question how their knowledge can be applied in real-world situations. By fostering this critical understanding, students are better equipped to navigate complex challenges they may encounter outside the classroom.

Disciplinary Disparity

Using LCT, the analysis of policy and interview data revealed a shift toward vocational education in Ethiopian higher education, often at the expense of theoretical disciplines like the humanities and social sciences. This tension highlights the risks of prioritizing practical skills over broader intellectual development.

The Ethiopian higher education policies, including the Ethiopian Higher Education Policy and Strategy (MOSHE, 2020), the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (MOE, 2018), and the BDU Strategic Plan (2020), predominantly align with (SG-, SD-) modality. In this regard, The Ethiopian Higher Education Policy and Strategy states the following:

> Higher education institutions shall give due emphasis to the development of science and technology as part of their missions (MOSHE, 2020, p.11)

Similarly, the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap has included the following statement:

> …provision of greater emphasis on science and technology (70-30 discipline mix) education and research, participation of stakeholders in program development and…, (MOE, 2018, p.56).

These documents emphasize the development of vocational skills in STEM and business disciplines, reflecting a practical, market-driven curriculum designed to enhance employability. This (SG-, SD-) approach signifies that the policies prioritize context-independent, procedural knowledge that directly addresses labor market demands, particularly in high-demand sectors like finance, technology, and engineering. For example, the Ethiopian Higher Education Policy stresses the importance of developing science and technology, while the Education Roadmap mandates a 70:30 focus on STEM over humanities and social sciences.

This vocational emphasis aligns with low semantic gravity (SG-) and low semantic density (SD-), where the focus is on knowledge that is highly codified, simplified, and directly applicable to specific, immediate job roles. As the policy documents emphasize market needs and employability, this approach is characterized by a lack of deeper conceptual

engagement with broader intellectual traditions. The emphasis is on practical skills that can be immediately applied, often with limited attention to the conceptual foundations that underpin these skills.

In contrast, the interview data suggests a significant critique of this SG-, SD-modality, as several interviewees point out the need for a curriculum that integrates both practical skills and theoretical knowledge. Interviewee 3, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Humanities, metaphorically critiques this trend by saying that the humanities, social sciences, and education are being "left out in the cold" and turned "upside down" like a tree with its roots in the air. This metaphor highlights the risk of neglecting these theoretical disciplines, which are seen as essential for providing conceptual depth and a broader understanding of societal and cultural issues.

While the policies primarily align with (SG-, SD-) approach, the interviewees advocate for a more balanced curriculum that embraces the SG+ and SD+ quadrant. This approach emphasizes both context-specific knowledge (SG+) and complex conceptual knowledge (SD+), providing a more holistic and intellectually rigorous education. The SG+ and SD+ approach is characteristic of disciplines such as the humanities and social sciences, where both theoretical grounding and practical knowledge are integrated, and students are encouraged to engage critically with the world around them.

The analysis using specialization codes further highlights the tension between knowledge codes (ER+, SR-) and knower codes (ER-, SR+) in Ethiopian higher education. The policy documents predominantly reflect a knowledge-driven curriculum (ER+, SR-), where the focus is on specialized, market-driven knowledge with little attention to the development of the individual knower. The emphasis on STEM fields and business disciplines leads to curricula centered on procedural knowledge (ER+) that aligns with labor market demands, such as specific technical skills in engineering, technology, and accounting.

However, as the interview data suggests, this vocational focus neglects the importance of knower codes (ER-, SR+), which are central to disciplines like the humanities and social sciences. These fields emphasize the development of the individual as a knower, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to engage with complex societal issues. Interviewee 5 critiques the vocational trend, arguing that:

> It "cuts off the branches of a tree" by neglecting the contributions of the humanities, which are essential for fostering informed, responsible citizens. This neglect of knower codes risks producing graduates who may be technically proficient but lack the intellectual tools to engage with broader societal challenges.

The tension between ER+ (vocational) and ER- (theoretical) knowledge in Ethiopian higher education highlights an imbalance: vocational training supports labor market needs, while theoretical knowledge fosters critical, well-rounded thinkers who understand broader societal contexts. ER- codes in the humanities and social sciences promote understanding of the broader societal, cultural, and intellectual contexts behind specialized knowledge.

The ER+ vs. ER- divide in Ethiopian higher education highlights the dominance of vocational training over critical, theoretical learning, underscoring the need for a balanced curriculum that integrates technical skills with intellectual development. Such integration

would better equip students to meet both labor market demands and broader societal challenges.

Discussion

This study examined how neoliberal policies shape curriculum reform at Bahir Dar University, using Legitimation Code Theory to analyze knowledge structures. The findings showed a shift toward vocational, market-driven education, sidelining theoretical and interdisciplinary learning. LCT reveals emerging knowledge hierarchies and reduced epistemic access, reflecting global trends that prioritize labor market needs over academic depth.

As global trends push education systems toward market-driven curricula, Ethiopia reflects these changes by prioritizing employability over theoretical knowledge. Policy documents and academic staff perspectives reveal a tension between practical training for immediate employment and the intellectual development traditionally associated with academic learning. This tension is evident in the rise of vocational education, which aligns with strong semantic gravity (SG+), focusing on job-specific competencies and practical skills rather than abstract, theoretical knowledge.

The Ethiopian Higher Education Curriculum Framework (MOSHE, 2019), the Education and Training Policy (MOE, 2023), and the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (MOE, 2018) reflect this shift by emphasizing competency-based models and aligning curricula with labor market needs. This approach mirrors trends in countries like the UK and US, where the focus on producing market-ready graduates has led to a diminishing of theoretical education (Ball, 2017). In Ethiopia, this growing emphasis on vocational education corresponds to strong semantic gravity (SG+), which diminishes the focus on theoretical knowledge and abstract concepts central to the humanities and social sciences.

Faculty members at BDU express concerns that this emphasis on vocational education, particularly in STEM and business fields, prioritizes practical, job-specific skills (SG+) over theoretical knowledge (SD+). This shift, as reflected in policy documents like the BDU Strategic Plan (2020) and Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (MOE, 2018), mirrors Crouch's (2018) observation that vocational education has displaced the humanities in Europe due to labor market pressures. While vocational education is seen as essential for economic development, faculty members warn that an overemphasis on vocational training could undermine intellectual depth and critical engagement. Interviewees 7 and 9 noted that the growing focus on employability could limit the development of theoretical knowledge, which is essential for fostering critical thinking and innovation. This concern is supported by research (Gale & Tranter, 2022; Trowler, 2020), which shows that prioritizing vocational outcomes can stifle critical thinking and innovation. As Shay (2014) and Young and Muller (2016) argue, this trend reduces education to skills-based training, marginalizing disciplines like the humanities and social sciences, which are crucial for addressing complex societal issues.

This tension between vocational training and intellectual development reflects semantic codes in LCT, where vocational education is aligned with strong semantic gravity (SG+), emphasizing job-specific training and market-ready skills, while general knowledge and intellectual inquiry are marginalized. This bifurcation risks undermining students' ability

to engage meaningfully with complex societal issues and global challenges, as they are not equipped with the broad critical thinking skills that comes from theoretical education (Young & Muller, 2016).

Despite the recognition of the importance of vocational education, the imbalance between vocational skills and theoretical knowledge remains a significant concern. Nussbaum (2016) argues that the humanities are essential for developing informed, ethical citizens capable of navigating complex social and political issues. Similarly, Marginson (2021) emphasizes the importance of integrating both vocational and theoretical knowledge to ensure graduates possess not only job-specific skills but also critical thinking and ethical reasoning necessary for addressing global challenges.

Globally, the trend toward vocational education has led to the marginalization of theoretical disciplines, particularly in countries like the UK and US, where STEM fields are prioritized, and the humanities are underfunded (Ball, 2017; Groeger, 2021). However, countries like Sweden and Finland demonstrate that balancing vocational education with theoretical inquiry can foster critical thinking alongside market-ready skills (Nilsson, 2022). In response to these challenges, scholars like Giroux (2014) and Agbaje (2023) advocate for alternative models of education that promote local knowledge, equity, and critical pedagogy—offering a counter-narrative to the neoliberal focus on market outcomes. In Ethiopia, the 70:30 enrollment policy (MOE, 2018), which allocates 70% of spots to STEM fields, further reinforces the vocational shift. As Interviewee 3 (Faculty of Humanities) observed, this focus on disciplines like accounting and engineering risks marginalizing the humanities and social sciences, which contribute to broader intellectual development. Faculty concerns about this growing disparity highlight the risks of focusing too heavily on vocational training. As Schwartz (2022) and Marginson (2021) argue, overlooking the humanities risks producing graduates who are ill-equipped with the critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills essential for tackling societal complex challenges. Research from the UK (Ball, 2017) demonstrates that focusing solely on vocational skills can hinder creative problem-solving, while Nilsson (2022) shows that countries integrating theoretical and vocational education foster well-rounded graduates capable of addressing both economic and social challenges.

Conclusions and Implications

This study explored the impact of neoliberal policies on Ethiopian higher education curriculum reform, in the context of BDU. The findings reveal a shift towards vocational education and market-driven skills, marginalizing theoretical and interdisciplinary knowledge. Policies prioritizing STEM and business fields have created a hierarchy that favors vocational knowledge, sidelining the humanities and social sciences. While some countries balance both types of education, Ethiopia's focus raises concerns about higher education's role in fostering critical thinking and societal engagement.

This study has significant implications for curriculum development, policymaking, and future research efforts. First, it highlights the need for a balanced curriculum in higher education that values both vocational and theoretical knowledge. Policymakers should focus equally on broader intellectual and civic goals; it shall be ensured that graduates are prepared

for the job market with developed critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and problem-solving skills to tackle societal challenges.

Second, higher education institutions should reassess their approach to academic disciplines, ensuring that fields like the humanities and social sciences are not marginalized. These disciplines are essential for fostering critical thinking, intellectual diversity, and social responsibility, contributing to the development of well-rounded citizens. An inclusive, integrated curriculum can address this disparity and promote the value of a broad-based education.

Lastly, future research should explore the long-term effects of curriculum reforms on students' intellectual growth, career outcomes, and societal contributions. It is important to assess how the shift towards vocational education impacts students' ability to navigate complex social issues and contribute to societal well-being.

Limitations of the Study

The study is based on a small sample of faculty interviews, which limits the diversity of perspectives. Future research, therefore, should address this limitation by incorporating more representative samples from each educational level.

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