



**TOWARDS A COMPETENCY-BASED HIGHER
EDUCATION PARADIGM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL
WORKING PARTY ON EDUCATION REFORM (PWPER)
REPORT ON UNIVERSITY CURRICULA IN KENYA**

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Abstract:

The Kenyan higher education sector stands at a critical juncture, necessitated by the global shift towards competency-based education and the domestic transition from the 8-4-4 system to the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). This paper critically analyzes the implications of the Report of the Presidential Working Party on Education Reform (PWPER, 2023), specifically regarding university education, training, and research. The analysis focuses on the proposed structural, pedagogical, and governance reforms, with a particular emphasis on the adoption of Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) in universities, the expansion of Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL), and the restructuring of research funding. Drawing on the report's recommendations and supporting literature on higher education reform, the study argues that while the PWPER report provides a robust framework for aligning university education with labor market needs and sustainable development goals, its implementation faces significant challenges related to funding, infrastructure, and academic culture. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for navigating this transformative shift.

Keywords: Presidential Working Party on Education Reform, PWPER, Kenya, university curriculum, CBET, ODEL, higher education reform, sustainable development

1. Introduction

The Republic of Kenya has long recognized education as a primary driver of socioeconomic development and a cornerstone of its Vision 2030. However, persistent concerns regarding the employability of graduates, the relevance of university curricula,

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and the quality of research have prompted systemic reviews. In December 2022, His Excellency President William Samoei Ruto appointed the Presidential Working Party on Education Reform (PWPER) to evaluate the education sector and recommend transformative changes.

Chaired by Prof. Raphael M. Munavu, the PWPER submitted its final report, *"Transforming Education, Training and Research for Sustainable Development in Kenya"*, in June 2023. While the report addresses the entire education spectrum, its recommendations for higher education are particularly radical, proposing a shift from traditional content-driven instruction to Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) (PWPER, 2023). This paper examines the implications of these recommendations on university education curriculum reforms in Kenya. It posits that the successful implementation of the PWPER recommendations requires a paradigm shift in pedagogy, governance, and financing to bridge the gap between academia and industry.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Shift to Competency-Based Education

The theoretical underpinning of the PWPER report regarding universities is grounded in Human Capital Theory and Constructivism. Human Capital Theory posits that education increases an individual's productivity and economic value; therefore, curricula must be aligned with market needs to maximize return on investment (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1993). Constructivism emphasizes active, experiential learning where learners construct knowledge through application—a core tenet of Competency-Based Education (CBE).

Globally, the move towards CBE in higher education is driven by the need to produce graduates with practical skills rather than just theoretical knowledge. The UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021) emphasizes the need for curricula that foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills. The PWPER report aligns with this global outlook, arguing that Kenyan universities must transition to CBET to address the "skills mismatch" that has plagued the labor market (PWPER, 2023, Chapter 9).

3. Key Recommendations and Curricular Implications

3.1 Adoption of Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET)

Chapter 9 of the PWPER report explicitly addresses "Governance of University Education, Research and Training," with a specific section (9.4) dedicated to CBET in universities. The report recommends that universities restructure their programs to focus on the mastery of competencies—skills, knowledge, and attitudes—rather than mere completion of credit hours (PWPER, 2023).

3.2 Implications

This necessitates a complete overhaul of the current curriculum design. The traditional lecture-based model, dominant in many Kenyan public universities, must give way to problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning. According to the report, this involves integrating industrial attachments and practical internships more deeply into the degree structure. For instance, the report suggests that universities should collaborate with the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector to create seamless progression pathways, implying that university curricula must become modular and flexible to accommodate TVET graduates (PWPER, 2023, Chapter 8). This vertical mobility requires a redefinition of entry requirements and credit accumulation systems, potentially adopting the Kenya National Qualifications Framework (KNQF) more rigorously.

3.3 Mainstreaming Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL)

Section 9.3 of the report highlights the establishment of the Open University of Kenya (OUK) and the mainstreaming of ODeL across all universities. The PWPER argues that ODeL is critical for expanding access and equity in higher education (PWPER, 2023).

3.3.1 Implications

Curricula must be digitized and redesigned for asynchronous learning. This involves developing interactive digital content and rethinking assessment methods to suit online environments without compromising academic integrity. The report notes the disparities in digital infrastructure (referenced in Chapter 2 regarding basic education, which sets the foundation for tertiary entrants). Consequently, universities must invest in Learning Management Systems (LMS) and train faculty in digital pedagogy. The curriculum must also include digital literacy as a cross-cutting competency to ensure both students and lecturers can navigate the ODeL environment effectively.

3.4 Research and Innovation Curriculum

The PWPER report (Chapters 10 and 12) underscores the role of universities in research for sustainable development. It recommends increased funding for Research and Development (R&D) to meet the African Union target of allocating 1% of GDP to R&D (PWPER, 2023).

3.4.1 Implications

The curriculum must shift from passive consumption of knowledge to active knowledge creation. This implies that undergraduate and postgraduate programs should incorporate research methodology and innovation incubation as core components, not merely as theoretical courses. The report emphasizes the commercialization of research, suggesting that curricula in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) include entrepreneurship and intellectual property management.

4. Critical Analysis of Implementation Challenges

While the PWPER report offers a visionary roadmap, its implementation faces significant hurdles that could impact the efficacy of these curriculum reforms.

4.1 Financial Constraints and the New Funding Model

Chapter 10 of the report details the new funding model for university education, shifting from a differentiated unit cost (DUC) to a model based on student needs (scholarships, loans, and household contributions) (PWPER, 2023).

4.1.1 Data Context

The report notes that public universities in Kenya are currently grappling with pending bills and financial deficits. Table 10.5 in the report highlights the magnitude of pending bills in public universities, which threatens their operational capacity.

4.1.2 Implication for Curriculum

Developing and maintaining CBET and ODeL curricula is expensive. It requires laboratories, simulation software, and robust internet bandwidth. If the new funding model does not adequately cover these operational costs, there is a risk that curriculum reform will remain a policy document rather than a practical reality. Furthermore, the emphasis on STEM and technical subjects might lead to the underfunding of the social sciences and humanities, creating an imbalance in the knowledge production ecosystem.

4.2 Human Resource Capacity

The transition to CBET requires a paradigm shift in the teaching workforce. The report acknowledges in Chapter 4 (Teacher Education) the need for retraining, but this is often focused on basic education. University lecturers, trained primarily in traditional instruction, may resist the shift to student-centered, competency-based assessment.

4.2.1 Supporting Research

Studies indicate that faculty resistance is a primary barrier to curriculum change in higher education (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Without comprehensive Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for university staff, the quality of CBET delivery may be compromised.

4.3 Infrastructure and Technology

The PWPER report highlights the digital divide in Kenya's education sector (Chapter 2). For ODeL to be effective, the national infrastructure must support it. According to the Communication Authority of Kenya (2022), while internet penetration is growing, reliability and affordability in rural areas remain challenges. A curriculum that relies heavily on ODeL may inadvertently disadvantage students from low-income

backgrounds or arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), exacerbating inequality rather than alleviating it.

5. Discussion: Aligning with Sustainable Development Goals

The PWPER report is titled "Transforming Education, Training and Research for Sustainable Development." The proposed curriculum reforms are intrinsically linked to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By emphasizing CBET, the reforms aim to produce graduates who are "*work-ready*," thereby reducing youth unemployment, which stands at approximately 13.4% according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2023).

However, the "*sustainable*" aspect also requires that curricula address contemporary issues such as climate change, ethics, and patriotism (PWPER, 2023, Chapter 12). The report calls for the mainstreaming of "*pertinent and contemporary issues*" (PCIs). This implies a transdisciplinary approach to curriculum design, where environmental sustainability and ethics are taught across all faculties, not just in specific departments.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The PWPER (2023) report represents a bold attempt to reconfigure Kenyan university education to meet the demands of the 21st century. The shift towards Competency-Based Education and Training, coupled with the expansion of ODeL, has the potential to democratize access and improve the employability of graduates. However, the success of these reforms hinges on the mitigation of risks associated with funding, infrastructure, and human resource readiness.

To ensure the successful implementation of these curriculum reforms, the following measures are recommended:

- 1) **Stakeholder Engagement:** Universities must actively involve industry partners in curriculum design and review to ensure competencies remain relevant.
- 2) **Investment in Faculty:** A massive retraining program for university lecturers on CBET pedagogy and digital instruction is essential.
- 3) **Infrastructure Development:** The government must prioritize the digital infrastructure backbone to support the ODeL agenda.
- 4) **Phased Implementation:** Curriculum reform should be piloted in key STEM programs before a nationwide rollout to allow for feedback and adjustment.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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