

Barriers and Detractors Influencing Transition from High School into Post-Secondary Education in Kenya: Actualizing Sustainable Development Goals on Decent Work

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Abstract

The transition from high school to post-secondary education is a critical juncture that significantly affects youth employability, particularly in low- and middle-income countries like Kenya. This desktop review explores the key barriers and detractors that hinder smooth progression into tertiary education, examining how these challenges undermine progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. Drawing on a wide array of literature, including government reports, international development assessments, and academic publications, the review identifies socio-economic disparities, institutional weaknesses, gender-based inequalities, and policy gaps as central impediments. It further reveals how inadequate career guidance, financial constraints, and regional disparities compound educational inequity. The review concludes that overcoming these challenges requires targeted investments in educational infrastructure, policy reforms, public-private partnerships, and community sensitization. Addressing these transition barriers is vital not only for individual development but also for national efforts to cultivate a skilled, adaptable, and inclusive workforce. The paper contributes to policy dialogue on educational access and provides actionable insights for stakeholders committed to actualizing SDG 8 in the Kenyan context.

Keywords: Educational transition, post-secondary access, Youth employability, SDG 8

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Background

The transition from high school to post-secondary education is a critical phase in an individual's educational and professional journey. In Kenya, this transition holds heightened importance due to the country's growing youth population and its aspirations for socio-economic transformation. Post-secondary education, comprising universities, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, teacher training colleges, and other tertiary programs, plays a pivotal role in equipping young people with skills needed for gainful employment and national development (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2021).

Despite various reforms in the education sector, a significant proportion of Kenyan students are unable to make a successful transition from high school to post-secondary institutions.

According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2022), less than half of students who complete secondary education proceed to post-secondary institutions. The situation is further exacerbated by disparities related to gender, geographical location, disability, and socio-economic status (UNESCO, 2021). This low transition rate not only affects individual career outcomes but also impedes the country's progress toward achieving inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

1.2 Problem Statement

The barriers that hinder a smooth transition from high school to post-secondary education in Kenya are multifaceted. They range from financial constraints and inadequate career guidance to systemic policy failures and entrenched cultural norms (Orodho, 2014; World Bank, 2020). These obstacles not only deprive young people of opportunities to advance academically and professionally but also undermine the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), which aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

This study seeks to examine the key barriers and detractors influencing the transition from high school to post-secondary education in Kenya, using a desktop review approach. It aims to synthesize existing literature and identify patterns, trends, and gaps that inform current policy and practice.

The guiding research questions are:

1. What are the major barriers affecting the transition from secondary to post-secondary education in Kenya?
2. How do these barriers vary across gender, region, and socio-economic status?
3. In what ways do these barriers impede Kenya's progress toward achieving SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Understanding the nature and impact of these barriers is essential for policymakers, educators, and development partners seeking to enhance educational equity and workforce readiness. By highlighting the link between education transition and sustainable development, this study contributes to a broader policy dialogue on inclusive growth and social justice. The findings may guide reforms in education financing, career guidance, and institutional capacity-building, thereby improving the post-secondary transition landscape in Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of the Transition Landscape in Kenya

In Kenya, the education system follows a structured 8-4-4 or CBC (Competency-Based Curriculum) framework that theoretically allows for clear transition points. However, actual transitions from secondary to post-secondary institutions are fraught with challenges. According to UNESCO (2021), Kenya has made progress in expanding access to basic education, but significant bottlenecks persist at the post-secondary level, where transition rates remain low, particularly among students from marginalized backgrounds. The Ministry of Education (2021) reports that while enrolment in secondary education has increased, only a portion of graduates proceed to universities, TVETs, or teacher training colleges.

2.2. Socio-Economic Barriers

Poverty and economic inequality are consistently cited as primary barriers to post-secondary access. Many students, particularly from rural and informal urban settlements, face financial constraints that limit their ability to pay for tuition, accommodation, transportation, and learning materials (World Bank, 2020). Although bursaries and scholarships exist, their reach is limited and often politicized (Orodho, 2014). In addition, family responsibilities—such as caring for siblings or contributing to household income—further impede transition among economically vulnerable youth (Wanjala & Mugo, 2020).

2.3. Gender Disparities and Cultural Norms

Gender remains a significant determinant of educational progression. Girls are disproportionately affected by cultural norms, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and gender-based violence—all of which reduce their likelihood of transitioning to tertiary education (UNESCO, 2021). Boys from pastoralist communities may also drop out early to support family livelihoods. While government initiatives such as the Elimu Scholarship and affirmative action policies aim to mitigate these inequalities, deep-rooted socio-cultural attitudes continue to influence education trajectories (MoE, 2021).

2.4. Institutional and Systemic Challenges

Insufficient infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and limited teacher capacity in public secondary schools affect academic performance and preparedness for higher education. Many secondary schools lack proper career guidance structures, leaving students unaware of available post-secondary options or the requirements to access them (Ngware & Oketch, 2015). Moreover, Kenya's dual-track system—favoring university over vocational training—has historically created a perception that TVET is inferior, thus dissuading capable students from pursuing such pathways (World Bank, 2020).

2.5. Policy and Governance Gaps

Although Kenya's Vision 2030 and the National Education Sector Strategic Plan (2018–2022) emphasize equitable education and skills development, implementation gaps persist. Fragmented policy execution, inadequate financing, and weak coordination between ministries and county governments contribute to inconsistent transition outcomes across regions (MoE, 2021). The absence of real-time labor market data further limits policy responsiveness, especially in aligning educational pathways with employment opportunities (KNBS, 2022).

2.6. Global and Regional Comparisons

Regionally, Kenya's transition challenges mirror those of other Sub-Saharan African countries, where structural inequality, underfunded education systems, and informal labor markets constrain post-secondary expansion (Lewin, 2011). However, countries like Rwanda and Ghana have shown progress through integrated policy frameworks that prioritize TVET and support youth employment, offering lessons for Kenya (UNESCO, 2022).

2.7. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a multi-theoretical framework that integrates Human Capital Theory, Social Justice Theory, and Sen's Capability Approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to post-secondary transition and their implications for decent work.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, popularized by Becker (1993), argues that investments in education improve individual productivity, which in turn enhances national economic development. According to this theory, access to higher levels of education should lead to better employment outcomes, increased earnings, and improved national competitiveness. In the Kenyan context, low transition rates to post-secondary education reflect underutilized human potential, limiting the country's ability to harness the demographic dividend (World Bank, 2020). The theory supports the view that expanding access to tertiary education is essential for equipping youth with the skills necessary for decent work, thus aligning with SDG 8.

Social Justice Theory

While Human Capital Theory emphasizes economic returns, it tends to overlook structural inequalities that restrict access to education. Therefore, Social Justice Theory, particularly as articulated by Fraser (2005), offers a critical corrective by focusing on the need for redistribution, recognition, and representation. Redistribution calls for equitable allocation of resources such as bursaries, infrastructure, and qualified teachers. Recognition demands cultural and gender sensitivity in policy design, while representation emphasizes the inclusion of marginalized voices in education policymaking. From this lens, barriers such as gender-based discrimination, poverty, and geographic marginalization are not just logistical issues but matters of justice and rights.

Sen's Capability Approach

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach adds another dimension by shifting the focus from access to education alone to the real freedoms individuals have to pursue and complete post-secondary education (Sen, 1999). This perspective emphasizes that while two students may technically "access" secondary school, their actual capabilities to progress may differ due to underlying social, economic, and personal circumstances. For instance, a student from an informal settlement with poor-quality education, family obligations, and no career guidance may not have the same freedom to transition into post-secondary education as a peer from a privileged background. The capability approach, therefore, supports policies that remove "unfreedoms" such as poverty, inequality, and lack of information.

Together, these three theories provide a layered understanding:

- **Human Capital Theory** explains the economic rationale for increasing transition rates.
- **Social Justice Theory** highlights structural and cultural impediments.
- **The Capability Approach** emphasizes expanding real freedoms and opportunities.

This integrated theoretical lens allows for a more nuanced analysis of the barriers influencing educational transitions in Kenya, with direct relevance to sustainable development and the

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a desktop review (desk-based research) design to examine existing literature, reports, policy documents, and statistical data on the barriers and detractors that hinder the transition from high school to post-secondary education in Kenya. This method is appropriate for synthesizing broad and diverse secondary data sources, particularly when primary data collection is constrained by time, resources, or scope.

3.2 Data Sources

The study relied on **secondary data** obtained from:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Government policy documents (e.g., Ministry of Education reports, Vision 2030, and Education Sector Strategic Plans)
- Reports from international organizations (e.g., UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, and ILO)
- NGO reports focused on education and youth development in Kenya
- Grey literature, including dissertations, theses, and media articles
- SDG progress reports specific to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain focus and relevance, the review applied the following criteria:

- **Inclusion Criteria:**
 - Documents published between **2010 and 2024**
 - Studies focusing on **Kenya** or sub-Saharan Africa with comparable socio-economic conditions
 - Literature addressing barriers to transition, such as socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors
 - Reports linking educational transition to **SDG 4** and **SDG 8**
- **Exclusion Criteria:**
 - Studies lacking relevance to post-secondary transitions
 - Non-English documents
 - Literature with outdated frameworks not aligned with the current educational and economic context in Kenya

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The review process involved a systematic search through digital databases, which helped in organizing and categorizing literature thematically. These were:

- Google Scholar
- JSTOR
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)
- African Journals Online (AJOL)
- Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and Ministry of Education repositories

Keywords and search phrases included combinations such as: "*Kenya education transition*", "*barriers to post-secondary education in Kenya*", "*SDG 4 and SDG 8 in Kenya*", "*youth employment and education in Kenya*", and "*determinants of educational progression in Africa*."

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **thematic content analysis**, allowing the researcher to identify, interpret, and report recurring patterns, themes, and gaps related to:

- Types of barriers (e.g., financial, infrastructural, gender-related, policy-based)
- Influence of societal norms and values
- Institutional preparedness and accessibility
- Linkages between transition challenges and the broader goal of decent work

The analysis was framed by a conceptual framework that aligned transition challenges with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). This framework enabled the evaluation of how systemic issues impact progress toward sustainable development, providing a broader context for understanding the challenges and opportunities in the education-to-employment transition.

By examining these various aspects, the analysis aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the barriers and facilitators in the transition process. This approach allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns across different dimensions, offering insights into the interconnected nature of challenges faced by individuals and institutions. The findings from this analysis can inform policy decisions and interventions aimed at improving the transition from education to employment, ultimately contributing to the achievement of related sustainable development goals.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As a desk-based study, no human subjects were involved; hence, formal ethical approval was not required. However, the research maintained academic integrity by ensuring proper attribution of all sources, respecting copyright laws, and adhering to fair use practices.

4. Results

The desktop review revealed a complex interplay of structural, socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that inhibit smooth transition from secondary education to post-secondary opportunities in Kenya. The following key themes emerged:

4.1 Socio-Economic Barriers

Economic hardship was the most frequently cited factor influencing transition. Many families are unable to afford tuition fees, transportation, accommodation, and other indirect costs associated with higher education, despite the availability of financing options like **HELB** and **TVET capitation** (Republic of Kenya, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Financial constraints often push youth, especially from low-income households, into early employment or informal labor markets (UNESCO, 2021).

4.2 Limited Access and Infrastructure

There is an uneven geographical distribution of post-secondary institutions in Kenya. Rural and marginalized counties face significant deficits in access, compounded by poor road infrastructure and limited student accommodation (MOE, 2018). Students in arid and semi-arid regions are disproportionately affected (UNICEF Kenya, 2020).

4.3 Inadequate Career Guidance and Transition Support

Career guidance remains underdeveloped in many Kenyan secondary schools. Often, teachers who double up as career counselors lack formal training or adequate resources (Odhiambo, 2016). Consequently, students exit high school without a clear understanding of available educational and vocational pathways, limiting informed transitions (Muasya & Gatumu, 2020).

4.4 Cultural and Gender-Based Constraints

In certain communities, cultural expectations, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities inhibit girls' progression into tertiary education (UNGEI, 2022). Boys are often pressured to support households economically, leading to early entry into low-skilled jobs (FAWE, 2021). Gender stereotypes also contribute to the underrepresentation of girls in science and technical fields (MOE, 2019).

4.5 Policy Gaps and Weak Institutional Coordination

Although policies such as the **Basic Education Act (2013)** and **TVET Act (2013)** outline clear transition goals, gaps in enforcement and coordination remain. Weak linkages between secondary schools and post-secondary institutions result in fragmented student progression (Republic of Kenya, 2021). The lack of effective data systems further hampers efforts to monitor transition rates (KNBS, 2022).

4.6 Mismatch Between Education and the Labor Market

Many reviewed documents identified a misalignment between secondary education curricula and market needs, particularly in technical and digital skill areas. This discourages students from pursuing higher education perceived as outdated or irrelevant (ILO, 2020; Manda, 2019). Employers frequently cite a shortage of employable graduates with job-ready skills (KEPSA, 2021).

4.7 Positive Developments and Opportunities

Kenya's education and employment landscape is showing promising trends that support improved transitions from education to employment and align with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The government has been expanding Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions and increasing funding to enhance skill development (MOE, 2021). Additionally, the implementation of a Competency-Based Curriculum aims to provide students with a more holistic skill set (KICD, 2020). The digital sphere is also contributing to this positive shift, with platforms like Ajira Digital (2023) offering career resources and job portals to connect youth with employment opportunities. Furthermore, the private sector is increasingly involved in youth employability programs, as evidenced by initiatives from the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA, 2022). These developments collectively work towards bridging the gap between education and employment, potentially leading to better outcomes for Kenya's youth and economy.

5.1 Socio-Economic Inequality as a Persistent Barrier

The results affirm that poverty and economic vulnerability remain the most prominent deterrents to continued education after high school. This is consistent with previous studies that show a strong correlation between household income and educational attainment in Kenya (World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). While public financial schemes such as **HELB** and **TVET subsidies** exist, their limited scope and bureaucratic inefficiencies hinder effectiveness, especially in reaching students from marginalized backgrounds.

5.2 Infrastructural and Access Disparities

Access to post-secondary institutions is geographically skewed. This reinforces regional inequalities, particularly in northern Kenya and arid/semi-arid lands (ASALs), where students face long travel distances, limited boarding facilities, and security risks (UNICEF Kenya,

2020). Such disparities undermine the constitutional right to education and challenge efforts to achieve universal access to post-secondary opportunities.

5.3 The Neglect of Career Guidance

The review emphasizes the critical role of structured career guidance in supporting students' transition. In the absence of comprehensive and contextualized guidance programs, students often make uninformed decisions or drop out of the education pipeline altogether. This gap contradicts Kenya's stated policy objectives and mirrors findings by Muasya & Gatumu (2020), who argue for integrating career development education into the school curriculum.

5.4 Gender and Cultural Determinants

Cultural practices, particularly those affecting girls, continue to impede transition. Early marriage, gender role expectations, and patriarchal norms disproportionately affect girls' progression beyond secondary school (UNGEI, 2022; FAWE, 2021). While affirmative action policies exist, they are often reactive rather than preventive, and fail to address deeply embedded social attitudes.

5.5 Weak Institutional Coordination and Policy-Practice Gaps

While Kenya has introduced robust policies such as the **TVET Act (2013)** and **CBC**, the lack of coordination between basic and post-secondary education providers, and between the education and labor sectors, reduces their impact. The absence of reliable data tracking systems also impedes the evaluation of student outcomes. As observed by Odhiambo (2016), education policies are often poorly localized, and implementation remains fragmented.

5.6 Relevance and Alignment with Labor Market Needs

A major finding of this review is the growing mismatch between education curricula and labor market demands. This raises questions about the long-term utility of education systems in preparing youth for sustainable employment. Programs like **Ajira Digital** and partnerships facilitated by **KEPSA** offer innovative models, but their reach remains urban-centric and limited in scale.

5.7 Transition Barriers as SDG Obstructions

The persistence of these barriers threatens the realization of SDG 4, which calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education, and SDG 8, which emphasizes productive employment and decent work. Without addressing transition challenges, post-secondary institutions risk perpetuating exclusion and inequality, undermining Kenya's development goals.

5.8 Toward an Integrated Transition Ecosystem

Addressing transition challenges requires a **holistic, multisectoral approach**. This includes:

- Expanding financial aid coverage to include hidden costs
- Strengthening career guidance services at the secondary level
- Enhancing the relevance of curricula through industry partnerships
- Decentralizing post-secondary institutions to underserved areas
- Investing in robust tracking and data systems for transition analysis
- Promoting gender-sensitive programming and community sensitization

Together, these interventions can support smoother transitions and contribute to a more inclusive and productive society.

5.9 Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The findings of this study have clear implications for Kenya's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly **SDG 4** (Quality Education) and **SDG 8** (Decent Work and Economic Growth). SDG 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, persistent transition barriers—such as socio-economic inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and poor access to career guidance—undermine efforts to achieve universal access to higher education and technical training.

Equally, **SDG 8** aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. The inability of a significant proportion of youth to transition into post-secondary education limits their skill development and employability, thereby weakening national labor force productivity and economic competitiveness. Without intentional policy interventions, Kenya risks leaving behind a large segment of its youth population, undermining the very foundation of SDG 8.

Addressing these educational transition challenges is therefore not only a matter of equity and access but a prerequisite for realizing a skilled, adaptable, and inclusive workforce. Investment in youth education is integral to achieving broader development outcomes and reducing poverty and inequality across generations.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the barriers and detractors influencing the transition of Kenyan high school students into post-secondary education using a desktop review methodology. The findings reveal that multiple, interconnected factors, ranging from socio-economic constraints and infrastructural disparities to inadequate career guidance and entrenched cultural norms, significantly hinder the transition process for many learners.

Despite the presence of progressive policies and initiatives, systemic challenges persist, particularly for students from rural, low-income, and marginalized communities. These challenges not only affect individual educational outcomes but also undermine Kenya's broader development agenda, particularly the attainment of **Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 8**. The misalignment between secondary education, post-secondary opportunities, and labor market demands further compounds the issue, leading to underutilization of talent and youth unemployment.

The review underscores the urgent need for integrated, multisectoral approaches that address financial, institutional, and socio-cultural obstacles. Specific recommendations include expanding equitable access to post-secondary institutions, strengthening school-based career guidance, aligning education with labor market needs, and enhancing coordination across education sectors and stakeholders.

Ultimately, ensuring successful transitions from secondary to post-secondary education is not just an education priority, it is a national imperative for inclusive development, social equity, and sustainable economic growth. Closing the transition gap will empower Kenyan youth with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities necessary to thrive in an increasingly competitive and evolving global economy.

7. Recommendations

To facilitate smoother transitions from high school to post-secondary education in Kenya, and to support the realization of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 8, this study recommends a set of targeted, multisectoral interventions.

First, there is a need to strengthen and expand financial support mechanisms. This includes increasing the scope of government bursaries, HELB loans, and TVET capitation to cover indirect costs such as transport, accommodation, and learning materials. In addition, decentralized, needs-based scholarship schemes should be prioritized, especially in marginalized counties.

Second, career guidance and transition services in secondary schools must be significantly improved. The government should ensure that trained, full-time career counselors are available in all secondary schools, and labor market information should be integrated into school curricula. National platforms for career mentorship, university and TVET outreach, and job fairs are also critical.

Third, investments in educational infrastructure must focus on underserved areas. More public universities and accredited TVET institutions should be established in remote counties, alongside upgrades in student housing and transport systems.

Fourth, gender-sensitive policies and community awareness campaigns are essential to address gender-based transition barriers. This includes enforcement of anti-discrimination policies, provision of gender-responsive facilities in schools, and initiatives targeting early marriage and cultural stereotypes.

Fifth, education curricula should be aligned more closely with labor market demands. Partnerships between learning institutions and industry should be scaled up to support curriculum development, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship training. Digital and green economy skills should also be emphasized.

Sixth, institutional coordination and data systems must be strengthened. There is a need for robust tracking of student transitions, dropout rates, and post-graduation employment. Collaboration between the Ministry of Education, post-secondary institutions, and employers is key.

Seventh, public-private partnerships (PPPs) should be encouraged to support infrastructure, mentorship, and resource mobilization. The private sector has a significant role in curriculum reform and youth employment programs.

Finally, inclusivity should remain central. Policies must address the unique needs of learners with disabilities, refugees, and students in informal settlements. Open and distance learning (ODL) models should also be expanded to accommodate diverse learning needs. Together, these recommendations offer a comprehensive roadmap to improve transition outcomes and promote a more inclusive, skilled, and economically productive youth population in Kenya.

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