

Originales

Policy–Practice Gaps in the Implementation of the Physical Fitness Common Course for First-Year Students at Bahir Dar University: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The Physical Fitness common course is a compulsory pass/fail course established by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education for first-year university students. It aims to improve physical fitness, prevent hypokinetic diseases, and promote lifelong healthy lifestyles. Although these objectives are clearly stated in the national curriculum framework, concerns have been raised about a possible mismatch between policy intentions and institutional teaching and learning practices. **Objective:** To examine policy–practice gaps in the implementation of the Physical Fitness common course at Bahir Dar University, with particular attention to instructional delivery, assessment practices, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and student engagement. **Methods:** A qualitative case-study design was used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five Physical Fitness instructors, one course chair, and one department head; focus group discussions with 72 first-year students representing 72 course sections; and analysis of the Ministry of Education curriculum framework and relevant institutional course documents. The student participants were organised into eight focus groups of nine students. Data were analysed thematically using an inductive approach. **Results:** Five interrelated themes were identified: variability in instructor commitment and instructional delivery; weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms; compromised assessment integrity within the pass/fail grading system; uneven student participation and engagement; and misalignment between national policy intentions and institutional practice. Although the policy emphasises inclusive participation, equity, and positive health outcomes, implementation at the institutional level was fragmented and inconsistent. **Conclusions:** The implementation of the Physical Fitness common course requires stronger quality-assurance mechanisms, clearer accountability structures, standardised assessment procedures, and sustained professional support for instructors. Improved institutional monitoring and more engaging, student-centred teaching practices may help bridge policy–practice gaps and strengthen the educational and health benefits of the course.

Keywords: physical fitness; higher education; policy implementation; pass/fail assessment; student engagement.

Lacunas entre a política e a prática na implementação da disciplina comum de aptidão física para estudantes do primeiro ano da Universidade de Bahir Dar: um estudo qualitativo

RESUMO

Introdução: A disciplina comum de Aptidão Física é uma unidade curricular obrigatória, avaliada pelo sistema aprovado/reprovado, estabelecida pelo Ministério da Educação da Etiópia para estudantes universitários do primeiro ano. Seu objetivo é melhorar a aptidão física, prevenir doenças hipocinéticas e promover estilos de vida saudáveis ao longo da vida. Embora esses objetivos estejam claramente definidos no currículo nacional, foram levantadas preocupações sobre uma possível discrepância entre as intenções da política e as práticas institucionais de ensino e aprendizagem. **Objetivo:** Examinar as lacunas entre a política e a prática na implementação da disciplina comum de Aptidão Física na Universidade de Bahir Dar, com especial atenção à oferta do ensino, às práticas de avaliação, aos mecanismos de monitoramento e responsabilização e ao envolvimento dos estudantes. **Métodos:** Foi utilizado um desenho qualitativo de estudo de caso. Os dados foram obtidos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com cinco docentes de Aptidão Física, um coordenador da disciplina e um chefe de departamento; grupos focais com 72 estudantes do primeiro ano, representando 72 turmas; e análise do currículo do Ministério da Educação e de documentos institucionais relevantes. Os estudantes foram organizados em oito grupos focais de nove participantes. Os dados foram analisados tematicamente mediante uma abordagem indutiva. **Resultados:** Foram identificados cinco temas inter-relacionados: variabilidade no compromisso docente e na oferta do ensino; fragilidade dos mecanismos de monitoramento e responsabilização; comprometimento da integridade da avaliação no sistema aprovado/reprovado; participação e envolvimento desiguais dos estudantes; e desalinhamento entre as

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intencões da política nacional e a prática institucional. Embora a política enfatize participação inclusiva, equidade e resultados positivos de saúde, a implementação institucional mostrou-se fragmentada e inconsistente. **Conclusões:** A implementação da disciplina comum de Aptidão Física requer mecanismos de garantia da qualidade mais sólidos, estruturas de responsabilização mais claras, procedimentos de avaliação padronizados e apoio profissional contínuo aos docentes. Um melhor monitoramento institucional e práticas pedagógicas mais atrativas e centradas no estudante podem contribuir para reduzir as lacunas entre política e prática e ampliar os benefícios educacionais e de saúde da disciplina.

Palavras-chave: aptidão física; ensino superior; implementação de políticas; avaliação aprovado/reprovado; envolvimento estudantil.

Brechas entre la política y la práctica en la implementación de la asignatura común de condición física para estudiantes de primer año de la Universidad de Bahir Dar: un estudio cualitativo

RESUMEN

Introducción: La asignatura común de Condición Física es una materia obligatoria, evaluada mediante un sistema de apto/no apto, establecida por el Ministerio de Educación de Etiopía para el alumnado universitario de primer año. Su finalidad es mejorar la condición física, prevenir enfermedades hipocinéticas y promover estilos de vida saludables a lo largo de la vida. Aunque estos objetivos están claramente definidos en el currículo nacional, se han planteado dudas sobre una posible discrepancia entre las intenciones de la política y las prácticas institucionales de enseñanza y aprendizaje. **Objetivo:** Examinar las brechas entre la política y la práctica en la implementación de la asignatura común de Condición Física en la Universidad de Bahir Dar, prestando especial atención a la docencia, las prácticas de evaluación, los mecanismos de seguimiento y rendición de cuentas y la participación del alumnado. **Métodos:** Se utilizó un diseño cualitativo de estudio de caso. Los datos se obtuvieron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas con cinco docentes de Condición Física, un coordinador de la asignatura y un jefe de departamento; grupos focales con 72 estudiantes de primer año que representaban 72 secciones; y análisis del marco curricular del Ministerio de Educación y de documentos institucionales relevantes. Los estudiantes se organizaron en ocho grupos focales de nueve participantes. Los datos se analizaron temáticamente mediante un enfoque inductivo. **Resultados:** Se identificaron cinco temas interrelacionados: variabilidad en el compromiso docente y en la impartición de la asignatura; debilidad de los mecanismos de seguimiento y rendición de cuentas; deterioro de la integridad de la evaluación dentro del sistema de apto/no apto; participación e implicación desiguales del alumnado; y falta de alineación entre las intenciones de la política nacional y la práctica institucional. Aunque la política enfatiza la participación inclusiva, la equidad y los resultados positivos en salud, su implementación institucional fue fragmentada e inconsistente. **Conclusiones:** La implementación de la asignatura común de Condición Física requiere mecanismos de garantía de calidad más sólidos, estructuras de responsabilidad más claras, procedimientos de evaluación estandarizados y apoyo profesional continuado para el profesorado. Una mejor supervisión institucional y prácticas docentes más atractivas y centradas en el alumnado pueden contribuir a reducir las brechas entre política y práctica y a reforzar los beneficios educativos y de salud de la asignatura.

Palabras clave: condición física; educación superior; implementación de políticas; evaluación apto/no apto; participación estudiantil.

INTRODUCTION

Physical inactivity is a major risk factor for hypokinetic and non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes mellitus, obesity, hypertension, and musculoskeletal disorders (1). Regular participation in structured physical activity can improve cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular strength, flexibility, and body composition, thereby contributing to disease prevention, health, and quality of life. Higher education institutions therefore represent an important setting in which to promote healthy lifestyles among young adults during a critical stage of behavioural development.

In response to the growing public-health burden associated with physical inactivity, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education introduced the Physical Fitness common course as a compulsory course for all first-year university students, irrespective of their intended field of study. According to the harmonised curriculum framework, the course is intended to encourage active participation, improve physical fitness, increase health awareness, and support lifelong physical-activity habits rather than focus solely on academic achievement (2). The course uses a pass/fail grading system, with a score of 50% or higher required to pass.

At Bahir Dar University, the course combines a limited number of theoretical classes with a stronger practical component focused on conditioning exercises and general fitness development. Preliminary

observations by instructors and academic staff suggested that the pass/fail system, variable instructor commitment, and limited monitoring and accountability may have contributed to inconsistent implementation across course sections. Students in some sections were reportedly awarded a passing grade despite limited attendance or participation, whereas students in other sections were assessed more rigorously. Such variability may undermine the principles of equity, fairness, and health promotion on which the national curriculum is based.

Despite the objectives described in Ministry policy documents, the apparent discrepancies between policy intentions and institutional practice have received little empirical attention at university level. Research on physical education in Ethiopia has focused predominantly on primary and secondary education, leaving limited evidence on the implementation of compulsory university-level Physical Fitness courses. The present study therefore examined policy–practice gaps in the implementation of the Physical Fitness common course at Bahir Dar University. Specifically, it explored instructional delivery, assessment practices, institutional monitoring and accountability, and student engagement.

Table 1. Summary of the themes, subthemes, and sources of evidence identified in the study.

Major theme	Subthemes	Data sources
Instructor commitment and instructional variability	Inconsistent instructional delivery; variation in supervision of practical sessions	Interviews; focus groups
Monitoring and accountability gaps	Limited follow-up; absence of standardised reporting	Interviews; documents
Assessment integrity challenges	Lenient grading; attendance not systematically tracked	Interviews; focus groups; documents
Student participation and engagement	Passive participation; motivation shaped by pass/fail grading	Focus groups
Policy–practice misalignment	Health and equity objectives in policy versus compliance-oriented implementation	Documents; interviews

METHODS

Research design

A qualitative case-study design was used to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions and of the contextual factors affecting implementation of the Physical Fitness common course. The case-study approach enabled examination of institutional practices within their real-world setting.

Study setting

The study was conducted at Bahir Dar University, a public university in Ethiopia where the Physical Fitness common course is compulsory for first-year undergraduate students.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience of planning, delivering, supervising, or attending the course. Participants included five Physical Fitness instructors, one course chair, one department head, and 72 first-year students. The students represented 72 course sections and were organised into eight focus groups of nine participants.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to support methodological triangulation. Interviews with instructors, the course chair, and the department head explored perceptions of course objectives, instructional practices, assessment procedures, monitoring mechanisms, and implementation challenges. Focus group discussions with first-year students examined their experiences of the course, levels of participation, perceptions of assessment, and views on fairness and effectiveness.

Relevant policy and institutional documents were reviewed, including the Ministry of Education harmonised curriculum framework, the course syllabus or departmental course guide, assessment guidance, and institutional directives relating to the Physical Fitness course. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in Amharic, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and supplemented with field notes.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Amharic and translated into English. Data were analysed thematically using an inductive approach. The process involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, and interpretation. Codes were grouped into broader themes concerning policy–practice gaps, instructional and assessment challenges, student engagement, and institutional factors affecting course implementation. Findings from document analysis were integrated with interview and focus group data to corroborate or contrast emerging themes.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles applicable to research involving human participants and the institutional procedures of Bahir Dar University. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis identified five major and interrelated policy–practice gaps in the implementation of the Physical Fitness common course: (1) variability in instructor commitment and instructional delivery; (2) weaknesses in monitoring and accountability; (3) compromised assessment integrity within the pass/fail grading system; (4) uneven student participation and engagement; and (5) misalignment between policy intentions and institutional practice. These themes were evident across interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

Instructor commitment and instructional variability

Participants consistently reported that the course was not delivered in the same way across sections. Some instructors were described as highly committed, actively supervising practical sessions and encouraging participation, whereas others were perceived as less engaged. Differences were also reported in lesson planning, feedback, attendance requirements, and supervision of practical activities.

Instructors and academic leaders associated these differences with the absence of a standardised system for monitoring course delivery. They also noted that the course was sometimes treated as less important than credit-bearing courses, which reduced institutional attention and instructional rigour. Consequently, students enrolled in the same compulsory course experienced different learning conditions.

Weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms

Weak institutional monitoring and accountability emerged as a central theme. Although the Ministry curriculum framework emphasises structured implementation and quality assurance, participants reported limited university-level oversight of course delivery. Classroom observations, performance reviews, and structured reporting were described as irregular or absent.

Document analysis also indicated that institutional guidance did not clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and performance indicators of instructors responsible for the course. This lack of operational guidance limited accountability and allowed inconsistent practices to continue without systematic feedback or corrective action.

Compromised assessment integrity within the pass/fail system

Assessment represented one of the clearest areas of divergence between policy and practice. The pass/fail grading system was intended to encourage participation and reduce performance-related pressure, but participants reported unintended consequences. In

some cases, students were awarded a passing grade despite limited attendance or minimal participation in practical sessions.

Instructors expressed differing views about assessment standards. Some considered that the pass/fail system restricted their ability to distinguish between active and inactive students, whereas others reported pressure to avoid student complaints or additional administrative work. Students also described unclear assessment criteria and perceived differences in grading standards across sections.

Uneven student participation and engagement

Student engagement varied substantially. Some students participated actively in practical sessions and recognised the health benefits of the course. Others reported low motivation, particularly when they believed that consistent attendance and effort were not necessary to obtain a passing grade.

The combination of pass/fail grading and weak enforcement of attendance requirements appeared to encourage a compliance-oriented approach among some students. Rather than viewing the course as an opportunity to develop lifelong physical-activity habits, they treated it as a requirement that could be completed with minimal effort.

Misalignment between policy intentions and institutional practice

The policy documents placed strong emphasis on inclusion, equity, health promotion, and active participation. However, these principles were not consistently reflected in institutional practice. The absence of standardised assessment tools, limited monitoring, and variable instructional commitment contributed to a disconnect between policy goals and classroom realities.

Participants considered the national policy framework to be clear, but emphasised that its implementation required stronger institutional ownership, operational guidance, and systematic quality-assurance mechanisms. Without these supports, course delivery remained fragmented and uneven.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative case study identified substantial gaps between policy intentions and the implementation of the Physical Fitness common course at Bahir Dar University. The principal concerns involved variability in instructional delivery, weak monitoring and accountability, compromised assessment integrity, uneven student engagement, and inconsistent translation of national policy into institutional practice.

Instructional quality and instructor commitment

A major finding was the variability in instructor commitment and course delivery. This observation is consistent with literature emphasising the influence of teacher competence, preparation, and engagement on students' learning experiences and satisfaction (3). Professional development and reflective practice have also been described as important mechanisms for helping physical education teachers clarify learning intentions, evaluate their own practice, and support lifelong participation in physical activity (4). In the present study, the absence of standardised supervision and professional support appears to have amplified differences among course sections.

Monitoring, accountability, and institutional support

The limited monitoring and accountability mechanisms identified in this study indicate that a clear curriculum framework alone is insufficient to ensure consistent implementation. Effective implementation requires structures for supervision, feedback, evaluation, and institutional follow-up. Reflective and systematic pedagogical approaches may help connect curriculum goals with everyday teaching practice (4). Digital tools may also offer opportunities to support teacher competence, documentation, and engagement, although their effectiveness depends on appropriate institutional infrastructure and implementation (5).

Assessment integrity and the pass/fail grading system

The findings raise concerns about the way the pass/fail system was interpreted and applied. Although this approach may reduce performance pressure, insufficiently defined criteria may weaken accountability and encourage minimal participation. Previous work has highlighted the role of assessment in shaping students' motivation and participation in physical education (6). Assessment should therefore communicate clear expectations and distinguish meaningful engagement and learning from simple course completion. More broadly, assessment policies should be aligned with their educational context and intended outcomes (7).

Student motivation and engagement

Uneven participation reflects the close relationship among instructional quality, assessment, motivation, and engagement. Teachers play a central role in supporting students' psychological needs and the quality of their engagement in physical education (8). Evidence based on self-determination theory also suggests that autonomous motivation is associated with the adoption and maintenance of exercise and physical-activity behaviours (9). Student-centred learning environments and active use of digital technology may further support intrinsic motivation and academic engagement (10). These findings indicate that the course should move beyond attendance-based compliance and provide meaningful experiences capable of supporting long-term physical-activity habits.

Policy implementation

The misalignment between national policy and institutional practice is consistent with implementation research showing that clear policy objectives do not automatically translate into effective delivery. Successful implementation also depends on organisational infrastructure, leadership, training, monitoring, feedback, and sustained support for those responsible for delivery (11). In the context of the Physical Fitness common course, stronger institutional ownership and clearer operational guidance are required to translate policy principles into consistent teaching, assessment, and student experiences.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings suggest several priorities. Instructor preparation and continuing professional development should be strengthened to reduce variability in course delivery. Quality-assurance mechanisms should include standardised reporting, periodic classroom or practical-session observation, peer review, and clearly defined responsibilities. Assessment procedures should be revised to balance the motivational intent of pass/fail grading with transparent measures of attendance, participation, learning, and fitness-related outcomes. Finally, the course should incorporate engaging and student-centred pedagogies that help students understand the

personal relevance of physical activity beyond the immediate requirement to pass the course.

Study limitations

The findings should be interpreted within the context of a single university and a purposively selected sample. The qualitative design provides detailed contextual understanding but does not establish the prevalence of the identified problems or allow statistical generalisation to other institutions. In addition, the findings rely partly on participants' perceptions and may be affected by recall or social-desirability bias. Nevertheless, triangulation across interviews, focus groups, and documents strengthened the credibility of the analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

Important discrepancies were identified between national policy intentions and institutional practice in the implementation of the Physical Fitness common course at Bahir Dar University. Although the Ethiopian Ministry of Education framework emphasises participation, equity, health promotion, and lifelong physical activity, implementation was characterised by variable instructor commitment, weak monitoring and accountability, inconsistent assessment, and uneven student engagement.

Bridging these gaps requires stronger institutional quality assurance, clear operational guidance, consistent assessment procedures, professional development for instructors, and engaging student-centred teaching approaches. Improving alignment between policy and practice may strengthen both the educational quality of the course and its capacity to promote sustained physical activity among university students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide regular professional-development activities to strengthen instructors' pedagogical skills, assessment practices, and shared understanding of course objectives.
- Establish standardised monitoring procedures, including observation of teaching and practical sessions, structured reporting, peer review, and clearly assigned responsibilities.
- Revise the pass/fail assessment system to include transparent and measurable indicators of attendance, participation, learning, and relevant performance outcomes.
- Use interactive and student-centred pedagogies to improve motivation, active participation, and understanding of the long-term health value of physical activity.
- Strengthen collaboration among instructors, course chairs, department leadership, students, and university administrators to ensure that institutional practice reflects Ministry policy.
- Review course implementation periodically using student feedback, instructional data, and emerging evidence, and ensure adequate resources, facilities, and timetable allocation.

DECLARATIONS

Competing interests: The author declares no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

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