



# **Barriers to Excellence: Exploring Challenges of Quality Instruction in Higher Education**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author WK was responsible for conducting the research on 'Factors Impeding the Quality of Teaching and Learning at Kenya Assemblies of God East University (East)' and the conceptual compilation of the manuscript and conducted the comprehensive literature review. Author LW contributed significantly to the critical revision of the manuscript for intellectual and grammatical accuracy, writing of the abstract and verifying the integrity and accuracy of the results. Author LN provided substantial input in reviewing the manuscript to ensure compliance with the Journal's submission guidelines and editorial standards. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

## **Article Information**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2025/v51i72104>

### **Open Peer Review History:**

This journal follows the Advanced Open Peer Review policy. Identity of the Reviewers, Editor(s) and additional Reviewers, peer review comments, different versions of the manuscript, comments of the editors, etc are available here: <https://pr.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/137948>

**Original Research Article**

**Received: 10/04/2025**

**Accepted: 14/06/2025**

**Published: 18/06/2025**

## **ABSTRACT**

**Aims:** The present study investigated barriers to high-quality instruction at EAST as part of an Action Research.

**Study Design:** The Study employed quantitative and qualitative methods while employing a descriptive design.

**Methodology:** The Questionnaire was administered to a total of 75 participants were surveyed among whom were 20 faculty members, 30 students, 12 alumni, and 13 administrators. The

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instrument used was a questionnaire with both structured and open-ended items. Qualitative data provided information on identified barriers in contextual detail with descriptive themes.

**Results:** The statistics revealed limited library resources and digital infrastructure as barriers to the kind of quality education aimed at by EAST. Further, the investigation registered inconsistent faculty development. It also revealed that the existing curricula and available employment were not totally aligned. Its common core courses registered more students with respect to the faculty capacity. The quantitative responses weighed the efficacy of the pedagogic approach to instruction employed by the University. This study revealed that 59% of the respondents assessed the teaching methods as being “effective,” while less than 8% found them “highly effective.”

**Conclusion:** These findings call for intentional systematic improvement in the teaching methods engaged for high-quality instruction to be achieved at EAST. The Study recommends intentional investment in digital and library resources. An increase in the number of full-time faculty, structured specialized skilled learning communities, and a review of curricula for 21st-century employability. With these factors addressed, fulfilling EAST’s Mission of providing high-quality, rigorous, ethically grounded fulfilling EAST’s Mission of providing high-quality, rigorous, ethically grounded, career-relevant higher education will become a reality.

*Keywords: Quality higher education; faculty development; student engagement; curriculum alignment; digital resources.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This research article presents findings from an action research study conducted at Kenya Assemblies of God EAST (EAST), a Christian institution of higher learning committed to developing academically proficient, spiritually grounded, and ethically driven servant leaders. Despite its strong vision and dedication to holistic education, EAST faces persistent challenges that hinder the effective delivery of quality teaching and learning. These include limited resources, inadequate access to modern pedagogical methods, and insufficient professional development opportunities for faculty. Recognizing the centrality of reflective practice and continuous self-assessment in educational improvement, this study aims to identify and address the institutional impediments to teaching and learning. By evaluating current practices and exploring strategic interventions, particularly in faculty development and pedagogical innovation; the research seeks to contribute to the enhancement of academic excellence at EAST and offer insights relevant to similar institutions operating in dynamic and resource-constrained environments.

EAST is a dynamic institution of higher learning, positioning itself as an emerging key player in the pursuit of providing relevant, affordable, and high-quality education aimed at shaping individuals who are not only academically proficient but also spiritually grounded, morally sound, and equipped for leadership in a globalized world. With its Mission deeply rooted

in Christian values, the University’s focus extends beyond merely imparting knowledge; it strives to develop servant leaders who will serve humanity in diverse capacities, across different sectors, with a spirit of integrity and competence. By prioritizing servant leadership, EAST aims to produce graduates who will contribute meaningfully to the global marketplace while adhering to ethical and moral principles that transcend gender, nationality, or personal beliefs. The University’s educational framework is therefore designed to harmonize rigorous academic training with the development of character and servant leadership, which, it is believed, will address the emerging challenges in both local and global communities.

Several factors can impede the quality of education in a university, ranging from inadequate teaching resources to structural limitations within the particular institution. These factors are often interlinked and can manifest in various ways, from outdated pedagogical methods to insufficient physical infrastructure. According to Zickafoose et al. (2024) resource limitations and lack of professional development opportunities are major barriers to achieving quality education in many African universities. Yussif & Mante (2024) state some of the challenges facing universities to include insufficient resources, limited access to state-of-the-art pedagogical methods, and a lack of robust professional development opportunities for faculty members. These bottlenecks pose significant obstacles to the EAST’s mission of delivering education that is both innovative and

of the highest quality (Murray et al., 2024). Professional development, as outlined by scholars such as Murray et al. (2024) is critical in enhancing the quality of education through better teaching practices. Furthermore, Al Lily (2020) observes that without adequate resources, a university's ability to provide cutting-edge learning experiences and foster an environment conducive to academic excellence is compromised. Al Lily (2020) further state that professional development programs are vital in improving faculty teaching effectiveness, ultimately contributing to the overall quality of education at institutions of higher learning. According to Okebukola (2014) the role played by academic staff in improving teaching quality in Nigerian universities is critical, noting that their professional development and commitment to pedagogical excellence are key to enhancing educational outcomes. The American Council on Education (2017) also emphasizes the critical role of faculty development in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, asserting that well-prepared professors are essential to fostering an engaging and effective educational environment. These factors may also include under-resourced libraries, outdated teaching materials, and a lack of technological tools that support modern teaching practices. Additionally, Zickafoose et al. (2024) identify key barriers to quality education in Sub-Saharan Africa as funding constraints, access and inclusion issues, and challenges in teacher education, and they accentuate the need for targeted interventions to address these impediments. Similarly, Quist (2023), in research examining factors hindering quality higher education delivery at the University for Development Studies (UDS), Tamale, Ghana, indicates financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, bureaucracy, and unfavorable government policies as significant impediments.

Further, a study by Langa et al. (2017) assesses barriers to enhancing quality in Kenyan higher education, identifying issues related to resources, governance, and pedagogical culture, and suggests a comprehensive approach to address these challenges. Another common challenge identified by Maiyo et al. (2014) is the gap between academic theory and practical application. This disconnect often arises due to insufficient faculty training on contemporary teaching practices, coupled with limited exposure to evolving pedagogical techniques. Inadequate teacher-student interactions and a focus on rote memorization rather than critical thinking are also factors that contribute to low-quality education in

institutions of higher learning (Yusuf & Adebayo, 2019). In assessing the preparedness of graduates at the University of Ibadan for the demands of the modern workforce, Omoniyi (2023) underlined the necessity for curricula to integrate 21st-century employability skills, including critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy, to bridge the gap between academic training and industry expectations. In 2024, Makerere University examined how it aligns its curriculum with the evolving needs of employers and the aspirations of students, discussing the integration of employability elements such as degree-specific knowledge, personal qualities, and career development learning to enhance graduate employability.

Means et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis that underscores the effectiveness of online and blended learning models, demonstrating their potential in improving educational outcomes when properly implemented in higher education settings. Commission for University Education (CUE) (2020) advocates for robust quality assurance frameworks to ensure that higher education institutions consistently meet academic standards and deliver high-quality educational experiences to students. One of the most pressing concerns for any institution of higher learning is the need to refine its teaching and learning strategies in order to adapt to the rapidly evolving demands of the global education sector (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This is a dire need for EAST as well. Furthermore, as the educational landscape continues to shift toward more interactive and technology-driven learning environments, pedagogical methods must remain relevant and effective (Baran et al., 2011). Biggs and Tang (2011) call for a strategic review of the current state of teaching practices, curriculum delivery, and the overall student experience, with a focus on identifying areas that require enhancement. They emphasize that a review of pedagogical strategies is essential to improving educational outcomes and fostering deeper learning among students.

At EAST, these challenges may similarly include faculty members' reliance on traditional teaching methods, which may hinder the development of a more interactive and student-centred learning environment, among others. Addressing these challenges is essential for improving the overall quality of education at the Institution. Continuously conducting self-assessment of the quality of teaching and learning is crucial for

excellence of educational offerings. Self-assessment is a pivotal component in enhancing the quality of instruction within higher education institutions. This is due to its ability to empower both educators and students to engage in reflective practices that foster continuous improvement (Adachi et al., 2017; Craig & Kay, 2021; McIver & Murphy, 2021). These are the very reasons which prompted the 2025 EAST Action research; in order to establish the impeding factors to quality education, for strategic correctional measures.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The main study from which this article is drawn was action research aimed at determining factors impeding the quality of teaching and learning at EAST. The second task of the study was to establish factors in the teaching-learning process that impede quality instruction at the University. The study adopted a descriptive research design with both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kothari, 2014). This mixed-methods design was chosen because it would allow for the collection of both numerical data (quantitative) and in-depth insights (qualitative) regarding the teaching and learning practices at EAST (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The quantitative approach was used to collect data related to the current state of teaching and learning, faculty development, and technology integration through structured questions/items. On the other hand, the qualitative approach involved collecting views and discourses using open-ended questions in the questionnaire from faculty members, administrators, alumni, and students to glean detailed insights into the barriers and opportunities for improving educational quality (Amberscript, 2023; Xiao et al., 2019).

A total sample of 75 was found sufficient, considering that the study tool was one questionnaire for all the categories of respondents: 20 faculty members, 30 students, 13 administrators, and 12 alumni were expected to participate in the study. However, 19 faculty members, 27 students, 13 administrators, and 8 others; including alumni and those who did not indicate their roles at EAST, responded. The return rate of 67 out of 75 is 89%. Convenience sampling, also known as availability or accidental sampling (McLeod, 2023), which is a non-probability sampling method, was employed in collecting data from members of the EAST

fraternity who were willing to participate in the study. The age groups were categorized into six: Under 20, 21–25, 26–30, 31–35, 36–40, and Over 40. Out of the 66 respondents of the study, the majority were aged over 40 years (47.7%), followed by the age bracket made up of respondents between 21 and 25 years (20%). Those aged 26–30 were third (15.4%), and 7.7% were respondents aged 36–40. The under-20s and those aged 31–35 combined made up 9.2% of the study sample. As indicated by the study participants, 52.3% were male, 46.2% female, while 1.5% identified as other. The analysis was done using the Google Form utilized for data collection.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Several factors can impede the quality of education at universities, ranging from inadequate teaching resources to structural limitations within institutions. These factors are often interlinked and can manifest in various ways, from outdated pedagogical methods to insufficient physical infrastructure. Zickafoose et al. (2024) identified resource limitations and lack of professional development opportunities as major barriers to achieving quality education in many African universities. These factors may include under-resourced libraries, outdated teaching materials, and a lack of technological tools that support modern teaching practices. Additionally, Zickafoose et al. (2024) identified funding constraints, access and inclusion issues, and challenges in teacher education. Quist (2023) indicated financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, bureaucracy, and unfavorable government policies as significant impediments. Further, Langa et al. (2017) categorized these aspects as issues related to resources, governance, and pedagogical culture. On the other hand, another common challenge identified by Maiyo et al. (2014) is the gap between academic theory and practical application. This disconnect often arises due to insufficient faculty training on contemporary teaching practices, coupled with limited exposure to evolving pedagogical techniques. Inadequate teacher-student interactions and a focus on rote memorization rather than critical thinking are also factors that contribute to low-quality education in institutions (Yusuf & Adebayo, 2019). At EAST, these challenges may include faculty members' reliance on traditional teaching methods, which may hinder the development of a more interactive and student-centered learning environment, among others.

The current study identifies with all the challenges cited by previous studies. However, in seeking to go a little further, the EAST study sought to establish factors in the teaching-learning process that impede the quality of education at the University by seeking answers to the questions on the effectiveness of teaching methods used at EAST; the aspects which might hinder active student engagement and comprehension in the process of teaching and learning; the extent to which student-to-teacher ratio at EAST allows for effective individual attention and support in the classroom; EAST lecturers' support in professional development to improve their teaching practices; and the EAST curriculum alignment with industry standards and the practical needs of students.

### **3.1 The Effectiveness of Teaching Methods Used at EAST**

This item was meant to lay a background for understanding factors in the teaching-learning process that impede the quality of education at EAST. Out of 64 respondents, 59.4% rated the methods as being effective, 26.6% as moderately effective, while 7.8% thought them as highly effective. Only 6.2% viewed the methods as somewhat effective or not effective at all. This question was meant to establish if indeed there was any cause for concern or if business should go on as usual. From the research findings, it is evident that something needs to be done in order for teaching and learning to be effective at the University. Only 7.8% of the study respondents found the methods used at EAST highly effective, demonstrating that the remaining percentage would prefer that there be improvement in how instruction is carried out.

### **3.2 The Aspects Which May Hinder Active Student Engagement and Comprehension**

The researcher sought to find out what aspects, if any, may hinder active student engagement and comprehension in the process of instruction. There are eight aspects which were evaluated by study respondents as being a hindrance to active student engagement and comprehension. The percentage rating by respondents of these aspects or areas was as follows: Inadequacy of digital tools (71.4%), library facilities (49.2%), textbooks (39.7%), number of lecturers (27%), student support (25.4%), lecturer support (19%), classroom furniture (14.3%), and training lecturers (12.7%). The others, such as failure to

respond to students, timetables not being followed, lack of online books and journals, and issues of fees among others, had 1.6% each. In addressing the aspects which may hinder active student engagement and comprehension, the University may have to consider seriously dealing with the insufficiencies of the first five, namely: digital tools (71.4%), library facilities (49.2%), textbooks (39.7%), number of full-time lecturers (27%), and student support (25.4%).

### **3.3 Student-to-Teacher Ratio Allowing for Effective Individual Attention and Support in the Classroom at EAST**

The implication of pupil-teacher ratios in influencing educational outcomes cannot be underrated. Lower pupil-teacher ratios can enhance individual attention and support, leading to improved academic performance (Muthanje, 2023). Another study explored the effects of learner-faculty ratios on academic performance at the University of Buea. The findings specify that higher student-teacher ratios negatively impact students' academic performance, emphasizing the importance of manageable class sizes for effective teaching and learning (Etomes & Lyonga, 2020).

The item on how the student-to-faculty ratio enabled effective individual attention and support in the classroom at EAST had 64 out of 66 responses. Those who viewed the ratio as being effective to a moderate extent were 39.1%, to a large extent, 37.5%, and to a very large extent, 17.2%. The remaining 6.2% rated the ratio as affecting individual attention and support positively to a small extent or to no extent at all. Although classes at EAST are moderate, there are those which host university common courses that tend to be larger than the usual average class size at EAST. This could have led to the respondents' opinion (82.8%) that the learner-faculty ratio at EAST might not favor individual student attention and support.

### **3.4 EAST Lecturer Support in Professional Development to Improve Their Teaching Practices**

In responding to the query on EAST lecturer support in professional development to improve their teaching practices, 33.9% alluded to moderate support, 32.3% viewed the support as being offered to a large extent, 14.5% to some extent, while 12.9% felt there was no support. According to Mukhale and Hong (2017) lecturers

in Kenya's public universities face challenges in pedagogy, leading to a strong demand for professional development programs to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a collaborative environment where lecturers can share experiences, reflect on practices, and engage in continuous learning (Kariuki, Itegi, & Mutuma, 2024). The trio underscore the importance of institutional support in facilitating PLCs to improve teaching quality. According to the findings of the current study, clearly, the support rendered to the teaching fraternity at EAST is not enough. However, a look at previous studies shows that the situation at the University is not exceptional but a common challenge among many universities in Africa.

### **3.5 The EAST Curriculum Alignment with Industry Standards and the Practical Needs of Students**

In assessing the preparedness of graduates at the University of Ibadan for the demands of the modern workforce, Omoniyi (2023) underlined the necessity for curricula to integrate 21st-century employability skills, including critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy, to bridge the gap between academic training and industry expectations. Anastasiu et al. (2017) stressed the significance of aligning civil engineering curricula with industry needs by incorporating both technical and soft skills. It further advocates for collaboration between universities and industry to ensure that graduates possess the competencies required in the competitive job market.

Data on the current state of teaching and learning at EAST was collected to evaluate the conduciveness of the teaching and learning environment; the methods used most for teaching and learning; effectiveness of the current teaching and learning methods are in engaging students and fostering active learning in various discipline; the level of engagement and participation from students in the learning process; Integration of technology into the teaching and learning process; availability and effectiveness of academic support services to students; and the effectiveness of teaching methods used at EAST. Those who rated the environment as highly or moderately conducive were 23% and 20% respectively. They found the EAST environment quiet and therefore conducive for instruction. The classes being spacious and

adequate was another reason given for the favourable rating. The faculty being present and using relevant material for teaching were also held as positive aspects of the environment. The general opinion, however, was that the University could do better. The negative aspects of the environment comprised of poor internet performance, lack of adequate facilities and dissatisfaction with the way exams were marked, leading to failure even though a student had attended classes, submitted all their assignments and sat the final exam. Lectures seemed the most utilized method of instruction (83.1%), Blended Learning, Discussions, Project-based Learning, Demonstrations, Problem-solving Learning, and Cooperative Learning were also frequently used. However, Flipped Classes, Community Projects and Personal Studies do not seem emphasized. This may be the reason why 74.6% found the pedagogy wanting in one way or another. Respondents who rated the level of engagement and participation from students in the learning process as Relatively High were the highest percentage at 43.1%; while 25.6% viewed them as very effective, and 23.1% regarded the methods as moderately effective. Encouraging was that none viewed the level of engagement and participation from students in the learning process as being Very Low. From the study findings, only 15.4% of the 64 respondents found EAST pedagogy very high in learner engagement and participation. The available Student academic support services comprised Study groups (31.3%), Mentorship (25%), Tutorials (17.2%) and Guidance (14.1%). The majority of the study respondents, conversely, (45.3%) rated them as only moderately effective, 31.3% as effective to a large extent, 10.9% to some extent, while only 7.8% thought that they were effective to a very large extent.

Based on the findings from the study on the state of teaching and learning at EAST, recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness and conduciveness of the learning environment. Implementing these recommendations can lead to a more dynamic, fair, and engaging learning environment in the University, ultimately improving student outcomes and satisfaction. The proposals included to:

1. Enhance Teaching Methods.
  - a. Promote the adoption of more interactive and student-centered pedagogical approaches.

- b. Provide training on contemporary teaching techniques.
2. Improve Learning Resources.
  - a. Invest in digital tools, up-to-date textbooks, and improved library facilities.
  - b. Expand access to online academic resources.
3. Address Staffing Challenges
  - a. Hire more full-time lecturers to reduce student-to-teacher ratios.
  - b. Ensure manageable class sizes, especially for common university courses.
4. Strengthen Professional Development.
  - a. Establish structured, ongoing professional development programs for faculty.
  - b. Encourage formation and support of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).
5. Boost Student Support Services.
  - a. Enhance academic advising, mentorship, and counselling services to support students' learning needs.
6. Align Curriculum with Industry Needs.
  - a. Regularly review and update curricula in collaboration with industry stakeholders.
  - b. Integrate 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, digital literacy, and communication.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of the EAST Study align closely with existing literature on the systemic challenges affecting the quality of university education, particularly in African contexts. While a majority of respondents at EAST consider the current teaching methods somewhat effective, the low percentage rating them as "highly effective" signals the need for pedagogical improvement. The study also highlights key barriers to active student engagement and comprehension, including insufficient digital tools, inadequate library facilities, and limited access to textbooks. Moreover, concerns about student-to-teacher ratios, modest support for faculty professional

development, and only moderate alignment of the curriculum with industry standards further underscore the multifaceted nature of the issue. These insights suggest that although EAST is not an outlier in facing these challenges, there is an urgent need for institutional reforms focused on enhancing teaching quality, investing in learning resources, supporting faculty development, and ensuring curriculum relevance to better prepare students for the demands of the modern workforce. Addressing these interconnected factors holistically will be vital for improving educational outcomes and advancing the Institution's mission of delivering high-quality, inclusive, and industry-relevant education.

#### DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

We the Authors declare that we utilized in some areas of our research.

#### Details of the AI usage are given below:

1. To convert the Objective Number 2 of the Action research 'Establish factors in the teaching-learning process that impede quality education at EAST' to a catchy title for the paper (Barriers to Excellence: Exploring Challenges of Quality Instruction in Higher Education).
2. To conduct Literature Review.
3. To summarize the research findings.
4. Make a conclusion.
5. Fetch the right recommendations.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the EAST administration and study participants for their cooperation and support in data collection.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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