

A Systematic Literature Review of Managing Universal and Vocational Secondary Education in a Plural System

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Abstract. Universal secondary education policies, particularly free secondary schooling and the removal of school fees, together with efforts to strengthen vocational secondary education, have become central to education reform in many developing countries. However, wider access does not necessarily lead to better quality or greater equity. This systematic literature review brings together research on policy design, governance, implementation capacity, and secondary education outcomes, with special attention to plural systems that include public, private, and faith-based providers, including Islamic education ecosystems. The review groups the evidence into four main areas: (1) policy design and governance; (2) equity, inclusion, and participation; (3) implementation capacity, including financing, teachers, and accountability; and (4) outcomes and transitions, such as learning achievement, employment opportunities, empowerment, and social cohesion. Overall, the findings suggest that these reforms typically increase enrolment, but gender, socio-economic, and regional inequalities often persist. Lower household costs can help substantially, but they do not always improve retention when social norms, indirect costs, and structural barriers continue to limit participation. Rising enrolment can also put pressure on school capacity and the quality of learning. In vocational education, outcomes tend to improve when curricula reflect labour market needs and are supported by industry partnerships, good teaching, and regular curriculum updates.

Keywords: *Universal secondary education policy, Vocational secondary education, Educational equity*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, universal secondary education has become an increasingly important pillar of education reform across many developing countries. This shift reflects a wider global commitment to expanding fair and high-quality access to education, particularly through SDG 4, which highlights the importance of inclusive and quality education for all. In this context, free secondary education and the removal of school fees have emerged as some of the most widely used strategies for reducing the financial barriers that often prevent learners, especially those from low-income families, from continuing their education beyond the primary level. Several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and across the wider Global South have introduced large-scale reforms to broaden access to upper secondary education, although the level of political commitment, implementation readiness, and policy coherence has varied considerably (Akuffo, 2025; Chanimbe & Ayi-Bonte, 2025; Gruijters et al., 2024).

In most cases, universal secondary education reform has focused on abolishing school fees and institutionalising free access at the secondary level. Ghana's Free Senior High School policy, introduced in 2017, is often cited as a landmark reform aimed at reducing inequalities in access linked to household economic conditions (Akuffo, 2025; Chanimbe & Ayi-Bonte, 2025). Similar reforms have also been introduced in other African countries, although their implementation has produced varied experiences and results (Gruijters et al., 2024). While enrolment has increased significantly in many settings, persistent challenges remain in relation to quality, governance, and educational outcomes.

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At the same time, international education benchmarking mechanisms such as the Programme for International Student Assessment have encouraged governments not only to widen access, but also to improve system performance and student learning outcomes (Kijima & Lipsy, 2023). These global standards have increased pressure on developing countries to ensure that expanded access is matched by measurable improvements in quality. Even so, the effectiveness of fee abolition policies has been uneven, with striking differences across countries and regions in terms of fiscal sustainability, financing capacity, and the quality of implementation (Sule, 2024). This inconsistency raises important questions about long-term funding, political will, and institutional capacity.

A growing body of empirical evidence shows that free secondary education policies have increased enrolment in many contexts. Several studies report improved participation once direct cost barriers are removed (Gruijters et al., 2024; Nwoke et al., 2024). Yet expanding access does not automatically produce educational equity. Although participation has risen particularly for girls in some countries (Gonçalves et al., 2025; Ohonba, 2025; Psaki et al., 2022) gender disparities, rural–urban divides, and socio-economic inequalities continue to shape secondary education systems.

Concerns about educational quality have also become more pronounced. When rising student numbers are not matched by sufficient investment in infrastructure, teacher supply, and learning quality, schools may face overcrowded classrooms and growing pressure on already limited resources (Ali et al., 2024; Martins & Matuja, 2024). In some cases, the early optimism surrounding fee-free education has not been followed by significant improvements in learning outcomes, meaning that the wider aims of universal secondary education remain at risk (Thelma et al., 2024). This underlines the importance of policy alignment: financial access must be accompanied by institutional strengthening and credible quality assurance.

Social and economic factors further complicate the pursuit of educational equity. Structural inequalities shaped by local governance, household income, and cultural norms continue to influence patterns of participation (Caniago et al., 2021; Ginna Novarianti Dwi Putri Pramesti et al., 2025; Widaningsih & Rahman, 2023). These findings suggest that policies that are universal in design may still produce uneven outcomes depending on their social context. In other words, achieving meaningful equity requires more than the removal of school fees; it also demands careful attention to the social, economic, and institutional conditions that shape students' educational journeys.

Alongside efforts to widen access, vocational secondary education has increasingly been viewed as an important strategy for addressing youth unemployment and the mismatch between skills and labour market demand. Governments across developing countries are beginning to see vocational pathways as a way of aligning education systems more closely with economic change and industrial needs (Idris, 2023; Zulkefli et al., 2024). Rapid technological change and the transformation of economic structures have strengthened demands for competency-based learning models that equip young people with practical and relevant skills.

Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, have expanded vocational education through apprenticeship schemes and partnerships with business and industry, creating stronger links between schools and the world of work (Suparjo & Hidayah, 2023; Suyatno et al., 2020). Malaysia's national vocational education framework places particular emphasis on collaboration between education institutions and industry actors to reduce skills gaps and improve graduates' work readiness (Alibašić, 2023; Hidayat & Janan, 2023). Some studies suggest that graduates of well-designed vocational programmes may enjoy stronger employment prospects than those from general academic pathways (Muljawan et al., 2023; Hidayah et al., 2026).

Even so, vocational education policy faces several challenges. Limited funding, social stigma attached to vocational pathways, and curriculum misalignment with rapidly changing labour market needs can all reduce its effectiveness (Istiqomah & MoHa, 2023; Sah & Fuad,

2024). Sustained engagement with industry and regular curriculum renewal are therefore essential if programmes are to remain relevant (Dahuri & Wantini, 2023; Fahmi et al., 2021; Sari, 2024). At the same time, inclusive vocational initiatives aimed at women and vulnerable groups show real promise in widening economic participation (Pahlevi et al., 2024; Usman et al., 2024), although gender and socio-economic inequalities still persist.

Another important dimension shaping secondary education reform is institutional plurality. In many developing countries, education systems are made up of public schools, private providers, and faith-based institutions operating side by side. This plural configuration strongly influences how universal and vocational education policies are implemented and how they affect learners (Asante et al., 2022; Bose et al., 2024; Gruijters et al., 2024). Public schools are often the main target of free access reforms, but limitations in infrastructure and governance frequently constrain the effectiveness of such initiatives (Mbugua & Nyabisi, 2023; Sosthenes et al., 2022).

Private providers may act either as complements to public schools or as competitors. Where public school quality is perceived to be weak, families with greater resources may choose private schools, which can in turn reinforce socio-economic stratification (Brandt & Mkenda, 2020; Kodila-Tedika & Otchia, 2022). At the same time, free education policies may shift enrolment patterns from private to public schools because of cost considerations (Ogawa, 2021). This suggests that universal policies do more than expand access; they also reshape the balance within plural education systems.

Faith-based secondary schools, particularly Islamic educational institutions in Muslim-majority countries, form another important yet still underexplored part of this landscape. Islamic schools often combine religious learning with the national curriculum, meaning that they are concerned not only with academic achievement but also with moral and spiritual formation (Hosen & Shukri, 2023; Ifani & Kartiwi, 2024). In Indonesia, for instance, Islamic education models seek to balance general and religious subjects while also strengthening students' sense of identity and social cohesion (Dostál & Hyánek, 2023; Khmous & Besim, 2020; Thoha et al., 2023).

Despite these contributions, faith-based schools also face important challenges, including limited funding, pressure to comply with state regulations, and the need to align their curricula with national standards (Cipta et al., 2024; Umair et al., 2024). Tensions may arise between preserving religious autonomy and meeting state requirements for curriculum and governance (Malini & Taufikin, 2023). Nevertheless, these institutions often play a significant role in strengthening character education, civic participation, and social ethics (Hamami & Nuryana, 2022; Nwafor et al., 2024). In some settings, they may also contribute to interfaith dialogue and social harmony (Faradisi & Anggara, 2024; Rahmadin, 2025).

Although institutional plurality has received growing scholarly attention, an important research gap remains. Empirical studies rarely examine in detail how universal secondary education and vocational secondary education reforms interact with Islamic education ecosystems (Gruijters et al., 2024; Parnashree & Rakshith, 2023). There is still limited research on implementation challenges within religious institutions, stakeholder perceptions of state-led reforms, and the integration of vocational programmes into Islamic schools (Akuffo, 2024; Alex & Manang, 2022). In addition, the differentiated effects of universal and vocational reforms on vulnerable groups within faith-based school settings remain insufficiently explored.

Against this backdrop, this systematic literature review seeks to synthesise existing evidence on the intersection of universal secondary education policy, vocational secondary education reform, and Islamic education ecosystems in developing countries. By examining policy design, governance structures, equity implications, and educational outcomes within plural systems, the review aims to identify patterns, tensions, and gaps in the literature. Understanding how expanded access and stronger vocational pathways operate within a diverse provider landscape is essential for designing reforms that do more than widen

opportunities: they must also be equitable, coherent, and responsive to the social and economic realities of the communities they serve.

Material and Method

Evaluating secondary education policy reform requires a range of methodological approaches to produce findings that are both robust and credible. Existing studies show considerable variation in the methods used, with researchers drawing on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs to capture the complexity of policy impact.

One of the most widely used approaches is the quasi-experimental design. This is often chosen when random assignment is not ethically or practically possible. In studies examining the effects of fee-free education policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, researchers frequently compare areas that have implemented the policy with those that have not (Gruijters et al., 2024; Jabbarian et al., 2022). Through this design, researchers attempt to estimate policy effects while taking into account pre-existing differences between groups that could otherwise lead to selection bias.

Another approach often regarded as highly rigorous is the randomised controlled trial. In this design, participants are randomly assigned to a treatment group and a comparison group, making it easier to minimise the influence of external factors. Several education studies have used this approach to assess interventions aimed at improving student attendance or raising learning outcomes, particularly in rural areas (Reuter et al., 2022; Vearing et al., 2025). Because allocation is random, causal links between policy interventions and observed outcomes can be identified more clearly.

Alongside quantitative approaches, qualitative case studies also play an important role in evaluating education reform. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, qualitative research can explore the lived experiences of stakeholders and reveal the dynamics of policy implementation at the local level. Research in Burkina Faso, for instance, has identified barriers to secondary education access by documenting the direct experiences of communities and education actors (Hiza & Paschal, 2023; Jabbarian et al., 2022). This approach offers contextual understanding that cannot always be captured through statistical evidence alone.

More recently, many studies have combined quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single design. This mixed-methods approach allows researchers not only to measure policy effects statistically, but also to explain why particular outcomes emerge. It is especially relevant when evaluating large-scale reform programmes involving multiple stakeholder groups (Azomahou & Yitbarek, 2020; Pierce & Hemstock, 2021). By bringing together numerical evidence and narrative insight, policy evaluation becomes more complete and more nuanced.

The choice of methodology directly shapes the validity and reliability of research findings. Randomised controlled trials, for example, are strong in identifying causal relationships, but their findings may not always be easily generalised if the study sample does not reflect the wider population. Qualitative studies, by contrast, provide depth and contextual richness, yet are more limited in terms of generalisability. For this reason, combining approaches is often seen as a more balanced strategy for evaluating education policy.

Design and Structure of the Systematic Literature Review. A systematic literature review is an important instrument for summarising and synthesising evidence on education policy reform. To ensure that its findings are transparent, systematic, and replicable, the review process follows a structured set of stages.

The literature search strategy is a crucial starting point. Researchers usually define the search terms, databases, and inclusion criteria in clear terms so that the search can be conducted thoroughly and consistently (Mhagama, 2020; Pezzulo et al., 2022). Several recent reviews have drawn on several academic databases simultaneously to ensure broad coverage of the literature (Ali et al., 2024; Richter et al., 2021). Such clarity is essential so that the review process can be traced and repeated by other researchers.

In this study, the following keywords were used: ("universal secondary education" OR "universal access to secondary education" OR "secondary education expansion") AND (policy OR reform OR governance OR implementation)

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were also defined carefully to ensure that the selected studies were genuinely relevant to the research question. Common parameters include the type of study, the publication period, and the research context or region (Demekas et al., 2024; Godoy & Rabinstein, 2022). Through this systematic screening process, only articles making a direct contribution to the evaluation of education policy were included in the analysis.

In addition, methodological quality appraisal formed an essential part of the systematic review. A range of assessment tools was used to evaluate the risk of bias and the methodological rigour of the included studies. This process helps ensure that the conclusions drawn are based on evidence that is both strong and trustworthy (Abekah-Nkrumah et al., 2022; Pezzulo et al., 2022).

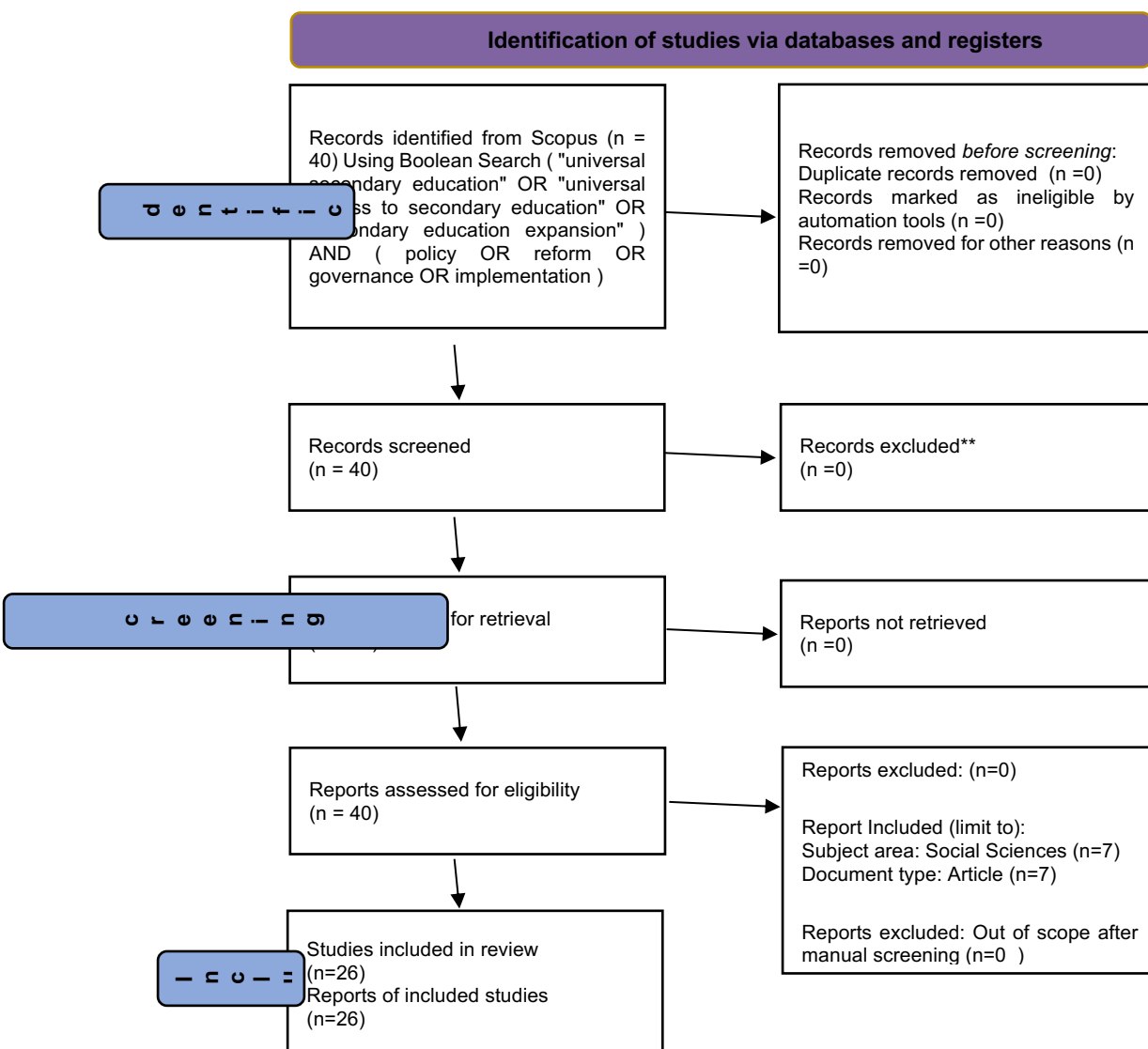


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram outlining the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion

Tools and Frameworks for Assessing Methodological Quality. When assessing research quality, particularly in mixed-methods studies, several frameworks are used to evaluate the risk of bias and the suitability of the research design. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool is one such

framework, developed to assess the quality of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies in a systematic way. It offers criteria tailored to each approach, helping researchers identify both the strengths and the limitations of individual studies in a comprehensive manner (Koebe & Marcus, 2020; Patel et al., 2025).

The Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool is widely used in the assessment of randomised controlled trials. It examines several possible sources of bias, including selection bias, performance bias, and outcome measurement bias, thereby providing a clearer picture of how reliable the research findings are likely to be (Atim et al., 2021; Chaula & Mhando, 2023).

The Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies is commonly recommended for evaluating quantitative research in policy studies. This tool assesses elements such as sampling methods, research design, and data analysis strategies, helping to ensure that the quantitative studies included in the review meet appropriate methodological standards (Joseph, 2020; Pezzulo et al., 2022).

Screening and Selection Process Based on Reporting Guidelines. To improve transparency and reproducibility, many systematic literature reviews follow international reporting guidelines that provide a standardised framework for the review process. These guidelines emphasise the importance of clear documentation at each stage, including the number of articles identified, screened, excluded, and ultimately analysed (Klymchuk, 2021). A selection flow diagram is often included to present this process visually.

The use of a standardised protocol makes it easier for other researchers to replicate the review process, reducing the risk of inconsistent interpretation and strengthening confidence in the resulting policy recommendations (Jaminola et al., 2022; McNair et al., 2021). In addition, the involvement of stakeholders such as policy-makers, education practitioners, and researchers can improve the relevance of the findings. Their participation helps ensure that the search strategy, selection criteria, and interpretation of results remain aligned with the educational context under review (Alam & Sulaiman, 2021; Atim et al., 2021).

Overall, evaluating secondary education policy reform requires methodological approaches that are varied, complementary, and carefully chosen. A systematic literature review built on a clear search strategy, rigorous selection criteria, and thoughtful quality appraisal can produce an evidence synthesis that is transparent, replicable, and suitable for informing policy decisions.

Results and Discussion

Results

Expanding Access and Implications for Equity

The literature reviewed under this theme consistently shows that universal secondary education policies particularly those involving the abolition of school fees have had a clear and measurable impact on expanding access. However, increases in enrolment do not automatically translate into improvements in learning quality or genuine educational equity. The synthesis presented in Table 1 reveals a recurring pattern: enrolment rises significantly, but this expansion is often accompanied by growing pressure on school capacity and concerns over the sustainability of funding.

Evidence from Ghana, for example, indicates a substantial increase in enrolment following the introduction of free secondary education (Akuffo, 2025; Chanimbe & Ayi-Bonte, 2025). While participation improved, Akuffo (2025) highlights that equity remains incomplete, as certain socio-economic groups continue to benefit less than others. Similar findings emerge from comparative studies in Sub-Saharan Africa, where regions implementing fee-free policies show greater gains in access than those that have not (Gruijters et al., 2024; Nwoke et al., 2024). In terms of gender equality, several studies report increased participation among female students after school fees were removed. Psaki et al. (2022) and Gonçalves et al. (2025) document improvements at the secondary level, while Ohonba (2025) notes that social barriers

such as early marriage and household economic pressures continue to limit sustained participation. This suggests that, although progress is visible in enrolment figures, deeper structural inequalities remain.

At the same time, rapid increases in student numbers have raised concerns about educational quality. Studies from Tanzania and Ghana show that sharp rises in enrolment are often followed by overcrowded classrooms and limited learning resources (Ali et al., 2024; Martins & Matuja, 2024). Research by Joseph (2020) and Kyei et al. (2024) further indicates that higher participation does not necessarily lead to improvements in literacy and numeracy. In some contexts, learning outcomes have even stagnated despite wider access (Gruijters et al., 2024; Gyan et al., 2023). Findings by Sakibu & Kamugisha (2022), suggest that constraints in infrastructure and teaching staff remain key challenges when expansion is not matched by additional resources.

Social equity is also shaped by broader structural conditions. Studies by Widaningsih & Rahman (2023), Caniago et al. (2021), and (Ginna Novarianti Dwi Putri Pramesti et al., 2025) show that socio-economic background and local governance arrangements significantly influence policy outcomes. In other words, although universal policies are designed to apply to all citizens, their effects vary across regions and social groups. This highlights that expanding access is a necessary step, but not sufficient on its own to achieve meaningful educational equity.

Overall, the findings under Theme 1 point to substantial gains in enrolment and participation, but also underline persistent challenges related to quality and the equitable distribution of benefits. These findings are consistent with the institutional and educational stratification perspectives outlined in this article's theoretical framework, which emphasise how universal policies interact with diverse social structures and varying institutional capacities. The following section presents a detailed synthesis of the studies reviewed.

Table 1.

Synthesis of Findings on Expanding Access to Universal Secondary Education

Reference	Country Context	Policy Types	Quantitative Findings on Access	Findings on Quality	Implications for Justice
(Chanimbe & Ayi-Bonte, 2025)	Ghana	Free Secondary Education	Registration increased significantly after the policy was implemented	Pressure on school capacity	Access has increased, but socioeconomic gaps remain
(Akuffo, 2025)	Ghana	Free Secondary Education	Participation increases nationally	Not all groups receive equal benefits	There are weaknesses in the fairness in policy design
(Gruijters et al., 2024)	Sub-Saharan Africa	School Fee Elimination	The implementing areas showed a higher increase in participation compared to the	Some regions are experiencing stagnation in learning outcomes	Different impacts between regions

			comparison areas.		
(Nwoke et al., 2024)	Africa	Universal Education	Increase in secondary school enrollment rates	Teacher capacity challenges	Inequality is still visible
(Psaki et al., 2022)	Multi-country	Free Education	Significant increase in women's participation	Quality has not fully improved	The gender gap is narrowing, but it hasn't disappeared.
(Gonçalves et al., 2025)	Global South Countries	Universal Education	Real increase in women's access	Variation in quality between regions	Gender equality is increasing in part
(Ohonba, 2025)	Africa	Universal Secondary Education	Increasing participation of female students	Social barriers still affect the sustainability of schools	Social factors limit the impact of policies
(Martins & Matuja, 2024)	Tanzania	Free Education	Surge in registrations after the policy	Class density increases	Quality impacted by rapid expansion
(Ali et al., 2024)	Africa	Secondary Education Reform	Increased early participation	Limited facilities and infrastructure	Disparities in quality between schools
(Joseph, 2020)	Ghana	Free Education	Increased attendance figures	There was no significant improvement in reading and arithmetic skills.	There is a trade-off between access and quality.
(Kyei et al., 2024)	Ghana/Uganda	Universal Education	Significant enrollment expansion	Stagnation of learning outcomes in several regions	A more balanced approach is needed
(Gyan et al., 2023)	Uganda	Free Education	Participation increases	Decline or stagnation in learning outcomes	System capacity is a determining factor
(Sakibu & Kamugisha, 2022)	Tanzania	Free Education	Increased registration	Inadequate infrastructure	Resource gap

(‘Approaches Used by Advanced Level Secondary Schools to Overcome Challenges of Fee-Free Secondary Education Policy in Tanzania’, 2024)	Tanzania	Implementation of Free Education	Increase in the number of students	Schools develop adaptive strategies	The challenge of maintaining quality sustainably
(Widaningsih & Rahman, 2023)	Indonesia	National Education Policy	Access increased at the national level	Variation in quality between regions	Strong influence of local governance
(Caniago et al., 2021)	Indonesia	Education Reform	Increase in participation	Inter-regional inequality	Socio-economic factors are very important
(Ginna Novarianti Dwi Putri Pramesti et al., 2025)	Indonesia	Universal Education	Increased access to certain groups	Differences in quality between schools	Different impacts according to socio-economic background

The table above confirms that, numerically, the universal secondary education policy has succeeded in increasing access and participation. However, empirical evidence suggests that without strengthening institutional capacity and serious attention to socioeconomic factors, expanding access can create new tensions between quantity and quality, and between formal access and perceived equity.

Review of Findings: Equity, Inclusion, and Participation

The findings in Theme 2 indicate that the expansion of universal secondary education did indeed lead to a clearly measurable increase in participation. However, its impact on equity was not uniform. Results were strongly influenced by differences in gender, socioeconomic background, and local conditions in each region. The synthesis in Table 2 shows that nearly all studies noted increased access or reduced financial barriers, but at the same time, inequalities persisted in various forms.

From the perspective of equality between men and women, Ngoobi et al. (2026) showed that enrollment in upper secondary education increased after the universal policy was implemented. However, the gap between female and male students remained due to social factors such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and family economic pressures. Similarly, Akuffo (2025) emphasized that although access increased nationally, there were weaknesses in the policy design because solutions that focused too much on economic aspects failed to address vulnerabilities that were cross-gender and regional. On the other hand, (Kazibwe & Li, 2025) found that universal upper secondary education was associated with increased female

empowerment. This means that the impact of the policy is reflected not only in school enrollment rates but also in women's bargaining power within the family and community.

However, expanding access does not automatically eliminate social stratification in education. Acosta (2025) shows that the expansion of secondary education in Latin America has coincided with segregation of educational pathways and the emergence of new forms of inequality. Crawford (2024) also highlights the tension between efforts to expand access and maintain the quality of learning. In many cases, increasing enrollment is prioritized even though the quality of learning is not yet fully developed. Thus, increasing school enrollment rates does not necessarily translate into better learning experiences.

From a socioeconomic perspective, Yoshida (2021) shows that the benefits of a continuous assessment system and class promotion mechanisms are not felt equally by all social groups. Kakuba et al. (2021) explicitly state that the impact of universal policies depends on household conditions and regional characteristics. These findings reinforce the discussion in this article's theoretical foundation, which states that stratification and specialization mechanisms can reinforce inequality if not accompanied by just and transparent transition policies.

The clearest numerical evidence regarding the cost dimension is provided by Omoeva & Gale (2016). They found that household spending on junior secondary education decreased by approximately 60 percent after the implementation of the per-student funding policy. However, this reduction in costs did not significantly improve school attendance or sustainability. This suggests that barriers other than direct costs, such as indirect costs, social norms, and family circumstances, remain determining factors. Meanwhile, Wokadala & Barungi (2015) found that government subsidies under the school partnership scheme benefited more from wealthy households than from poor households. Although the poor received a relatively greater proportion of benefits, the overall distribution was still not entirely in favor of those most in need. Thus, the policy did not necessarily result in truly progressive equity.

The employment dimension of teachers also influences the equity of the education system. Molyneux (2011) shows that universal secondary education policies impact female and male teachers differently, particularly in terms of real earnings and the need to seek additional employment. These inequalities have the potential to impact the focus of teaching and, ultimately, the quality of learning students receive.

Overall, the synthesis of Theme 2 reveals three main patterns. First, nearly all studies note increased enrollment following fee elimination or the expansion of universal policies. Second, the impact varies by gender, socioeconomic background, and region. Third, reducing cost barriers by around 60 percent does not automatically guarantee improved school sustainability or learning outcomes if social and structural barriers remain strong (Akuffo, 2025; Kakuba et al., 2021; Ngoobi et al., 2026; Omoeva & Gale, 2016; Wokadala & Barungi, 2015; Yoshida, 2021).

The following is Table 2 in full, which forms the basis for the synthesis of the findings in this section.

Table 2.

Fairness, Inclusion, and Participation in General and Vocational Paths

Reference	Equity markers (gender/socio-economic background/region/vulnerable groups)	Path/Provider (general or vocational; Islamic or non-Islamic)	Outcome measures (access/retention/graduation/participation)	Direction of findings related to justice	Main explanatory mechanism
(Ngoobi et al.)	Gender (girls), social norms	General route;	Enrollment, school continuity,	Gender gap persists	Early marriage

al., 2026)		Islamic providers not discussed	graduation; senior secondary participation	despite increasing enrollment	, teenage pregnancy, economic hardship, gender-based violence; the need for gender-sensitive policies and funding support
(Akuffo, 2025)	Cross-dimensional equity: economic, school, gender, region	General pathway (upper middle free); Islamic providers not discussed	Upper-middle access/participation; policy justice dimension	Access is increasing , but fairness weaknesses remain	Overly uniform (economic) solutions do not address cross-group differences.
(Kazibwe & Li, 2025)	Gender (women's empowerment)	General route; Islamic providers not discussed	Women's empowerment and educational attainment	Universal secondary education is associated with increased empowerment	Education improves bargaining position and role in family decision making.
(Acosta, 2025)	Old and new gaps (social class), region	Intermediate systems (general and split lines); Islamic providers are not discussed	Access/participation differences and path separation	Expansion continues, but inequality persists or changes shape	Differences in schools and pathways reinforce structural inequalities.

(Crawford, 2024)	The tension between access and quality	General route; Islamic providers not discussed	Access and quality of learning	Emphasis on access first	Political considerations and system capacity
(Yoshida, 2021)	Socio-economic background	General pathway (junior high); Islamic providers not discussed	Benefits of the assessment and promotion system	Benefits vary by socio-economic background	The assessment system produces uneven impacts
(Kakubal, 2021)	Access by social group and region	General route; Islamic providers not discussed	Access/participation after universal policy	The impact of the policy is uneven	Certain groups still experience access barriers
(Omoeva & Gale, 2016)	Household expenses	General route; Islamic providers not discussed	School fees, attendance, school continuity	Household costs fell by about 60% , but attendance and sustainability did not improve significantly.	Direct costs are reduced, but other barriers remain.
(Wokadala & Barungi, 2015)	Distribution of subsidies (rich and poor)	Public-private partnerships; Islamic providers not discussed	Benefits of public spending	Wealthy households benefit more ; equity is limited	Public spending design and the ability to utilize partnership schools
(Molynaux, 2011)	Gender (female and male teachers)	General route; Islamic providers not discussed	Impact of policy on teachers: income and side jobs	Impacts differ by gender	Decrease in real income and the need to seek additional work

The table confirms that increasing access is indeed a tangible achievement of universal policies. However, educational equity remains a complex and multi-layered issue. Therefore, secondary education reform cannot simply stop at increasing enrollment rates; it must consciously and systematically address the social, economic, and institutional factors that influence student participation and learning outcomes.

Implementation Capacity, Financing, Teachers, and Accountability

The findings in Theme 3 confirm that the success of universal secondary education policies and the strengthening of vocational pathways depends heavily on concrete readiness at both the system and school levels. Policies that appear good on paper will not produce meaningful change unless supported by adequate funding, guaranteed teacher welfare, a prepared school organization, and clear accountability mechanisms. The synthesis in Table 3 shows that nearly all studies place these factors as determinants of the quality and sustainability of reforms.

Chapman et al. (2010) show that in the implementation of universal secondary education, system capacity is often underestimated from the policy formulation stage. Principals find themselves in a difficult position: on the one hand, they support national policy, but on the other, they doubt the availability of resources and support on the ground. These findings demonstrate that official recognition of a policy does not always equate to the readiness of structures and resources to implement it.

Kofinti (2025) reinforces this view. Although teachers are motivated to implement the free senior high school policy, limited resources and a lack of clear information flow hinder effective implementation. Without strong coordination between policymakers at the central level and implementers at the school level, the quality of education services can easily erode.

Teacher welfare is another important issue. Molyneaux (2011) found that universal secondary education policies resulted in lower real teacher incomes and increased the need to seek additional employment. These impacts differed between male and female teachers, potentially impacting the concentration and quality of teaching. When teachers face economic pressures, expanding access without adequate incentives can actually undermine the effectiveness of reforms.

Knight (2014) added that weak professional support for teachers and low literacy skills among some students also hamper school sustainability and increase the risk of dropping out. Therefore, school organizational capacity, including teacher mentoring systems and academic support, is key to ensuring the sustainability of policy outcomes.

On the financing side, Omoeva & Gale (2016) provide strong numerical evidence. They found that a per-student funding policy reduced household expenditure by approximately 60 percent at the junior secondary level. However, this reduction in costs was not accompanied by a significant increase in school attendance or sustainability. This suggests that barriers beyond direct costs, such as indirect costs, family circumstances, or social norms, continue to play a significant role in determining student participation.

Wokadala & Barungi (2015) showed that in partnership schemes between the government and private schools, the benefits of public subsidies tend to be enjoyed more by wealthier households. Although the poor receive a relatively larger proportion of the benefits, the overall distribution of aid has not been fully in favor of those most in need. This finding highlights the importance of accurate targeting and transparency in financing design.

Barrera-Osorio et al. (2020), using a stepwise experimental design, demonstrated that a voucher-based partnership program significantly increased enrollment while simultaneously driving improvements in learning outcomes. These results indicate that when school facilities are adequate and incentives are properly designed, reforms can have a positive impact on quality. However, Ellison (2025) cautioned that the funding mechanism within the free education policy has not completely eliminated structural barriers and may even perpetuate pre-existing patterns of exclusion.

Baum (2012) emphasizes the importance of a strong accountability framework and legal basis in education service contracts. Without a commitment to the principle of the right to education, expanding access through the non-state sector risks undermining the principle of equality. Meanwhile, London (1991) points out that emergency strategies such as alternating learning systems can expand access in the short term, but have social and academic consequences that require careful review.

Overall, the findings in Theme 3 demonstrate that the success of secondary education policies is determined not only by eliminating fees or adding educational pathways, but also by the system's readiness to provide sustainable financing, safeguard teacher welfare, ensure transparent governance, and maintain the quality of learning. Numerical evidence, such as a 60 percent reduction in household costs Omoeva & Gale (2016) or a significant increase in enrollment in partnership programs (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2020), suggests potential success. However, equitable distribution of benefits and sustainability of quality remain key challenges (Ellison, 2025; Wokadala & Barungi, 2015).

The following is Table 3 in full, which forms the basis for the synthesis in this section.

Table 3.

Implementation Capacity: Financing, Teachers, Curriculum, and Accountability

Reference	Implementation area	Features of policy design	Scope of provider	Main barriers or drivers	Impact on process and quality
(Chapman et al., 2010)	Implementation governance, system capacity, and school leadership	Universal or free secondary education	Not discussed	System capacity is under-represented; principals are under-involved	Risk of quality decline if capacity is not strengthened
(Kofinti, 2025)	Teachers, school resources, and implementation coordination	Free high school education	Not discussed	Resource scarcity; information gap	Service quality is hampered
(Molyneaux, 2011)	Teachers, economic incentives, and working conditions	Universal secondary education	Not discussed	Decline in real income; increase in additional work	Potential for decreased focus and quality of learning
(Knight, 2014)	School organization; teacher support; literacy skills	Universal secondary education	Not discussed	Weak professional support	School continuity and discipline are affected
(Omoeva & Gale, 2016)	Financing: household expenses	Funds per student	Not discussed	Household expenses fell by about 60%	Attendance and sustainability did not increase significantly
(Wokadala & Barungi, 2015)	Accountability for public spending; subsidies	Public private partnership	Not discussed	The benefits of subsidies are enjoyed more by	Limited equality

				wealthy households	
(Barrera-Osorio et al., 2020)	Implementation of partnerships; financing incentives	Coupon scheme or per student funding	Low-cost private schools	Adequate facilities; selection of recipients	Enrollment increases significantly; learning outcomes rise
(Ellison, 2025)	Funding mechanisms; structural barriers	Free education and partnership	Non-state schools	Financial and structural barriers have not been fully overcome	The potential for exceptions remains
(Baum, 2012)	Accountability; legal basis for policy	Educational service contract	Not discussed	The tension between the right to education and policy practice	Need to strengthen accountability mechanisms
(London, 1991)	Emergency capacity strategy	Alternating learning system	Not discussed	Social and academic consequences	Policy review is needed

The table shows that secondary education reform requires a balance between expanding access and strengthening system capacity. Without targeted funding, guaranteed teacher welfare, and transparent and accountable governance, policy expansion has the potential to create new inequalities in educational quality and outcomes.

Educational Outcomes, Work Transition, and Social Integration

Theme 4 highlights the tangible outcomes of secondary education policies, both in general and vocational pathways, as well as the role of Islamic-based schools in character formation and strengthening social integration. The synthesis in Table 4 shows that the impact of secondary education reform extends beyond improving access to employment opportunities, readiness to continue education or enter the workforce, and strengthening social identity and togetherness.

In the context of vocational secondary education, various studies have demonstrated a strong link between well-designed programs and increased graduate employment opportunities. Muljawan et al. (2023) found that vocational graduates were more likely to be employed than general graduates, particularly in sectors with a shortage of skilled workers. This finding aligns with Zulkefli et al. (2024) and Idris (2023), who emphasized that aligning the curriculum with the needs of the workforce makes graduate competencies more relevant and in-demand.

Partnerships with the business world are a key factor. Alibašić (2023) and Hidayat & Janan (2023) show that a national vocational education framework that encourages collaboration between schools and industry contributes to improving students' job readiness. In some contexts, internship programs have been shown to significantly increase the chances of transitioning to the workforce because students gain hands-on experience before graduation. However, the sustainability of this impact depends heavily on regular curriculum updates and the quality of teaching (Fahmi et al., 2021; Sari, 2024). Dahuri & Wantini (2023) also emphasize the importance of ongoing involvement of various government, school, and business stakeholders to ensure programs remain aligned with economic developments.

From an inclusion perspective, Usman et al. (2024) and Pahlevi et al. (2024) show that vocational education policies specifically targeting women and vulnerable groups can increase their economic participation. Despite the increase in participation rates, challenges such as social

norms and limited access to job networks still impact long-term success. This emphasizes that expanding opportunities must be accompanied by adequate social support.

Meanwhile, Islamic-based secondary schools make a significant contribution to character formation and strengthening social integration. Hosen & Shukri (2023) and Ifani & Kartiwi (2024) emphasized that combining religious and general curricula can create a balance between academic achievement and moral development. In Indonesia, the Islamic education model, which integrates general and religious subjects, has been shown to strengthen students' identity while maintaining a connection to the national education system (Dostál & Hyánek, 2023; Thoha et al., 2023).

Khmous & Besim (2020) demonstrated that a values-based educational approach plays a role in strengthening social solidarity. Hamami & Nuryana (2022) and Nwafor et al. (2024) found that character education in Islamic schools is associated with a decrease in adolescent deviant behavior and an increase in civic responsibility. In a pluralistic society, Faradisi & Anggara (2024) and Rahmadin (2025) demonstrated that interfaith dialogue activities in faith-based schools help foster tolerance and social harmony.

Overall, the findings in Theme 4 reveal two main dimensions of outcomes. First, vocational secondary education can improve job opportunities and readiness to enter the workforce if supported by industry partnerships and a curriculum that is responsive to change (Alibašić, 2023; Hidayat & Janan, 2023; Idris, 2023; Muljawan et al., 2023; Zulkefli et al., 2024). Second, Islamic-based schools play a role in shaping character, strengthening identity, and fostering social integration that strengthens community togetherness (Faradisi & Anggara, 2024; Hamami & Nuryana, 2022; Hosen & DR. SYAZA FARHANA BINTI MOHAMAD SHUKRI, 2023; Ifani & Kartiwi, 2024; Khmous & Besim, 2020; Nwafor et al., 2024; Rahmadin, 2025). However, the sustainability of these impacts remains dependent on the quality of governance, consistent curriculum updates, and the ability of the education system to bridge learning pathways with social and economic opportunities. The following is Table 4 in full, which forms the basis for the synthesis in this section.

Table 4.
Secondary Education Outcomes: Employment, Transition, and Social Integration

Reference	External Focus	Line/Provider	Key Findings (Quantitative/Qualitative)	Policy Implications
(Muljawan et al., 2023)	Job opportunities for graduates	Vocational	Vocational graduates have a higher chance of getting a job than those from the general pathway.	Strengthening competency relevance
(Zulkefli et al., 2024)	Skills match	Vocational	Curriculum alignment improves work readiness	Cooperation with industry is very important
(Idris, 2023)	Skills mismatch	Vocational	Competency-based education reduces mismatch with job needs	Responsive curriculum updates
(Alibašić, 2023)	National vocational framework	Vocational	Industry partnerships enhance smooth transition to work	Strengthening institutional cooperation
(Hidayat & Janan, 2023)	Workforce readiness	Vocational	Industry-based programs enhance graduates' employability	Strengthening internship programs

(Sari, 2024)	Curriculum updates	Vocational	Unupdated curriculum reduces the relevance of graduates	Periodic evaluation and review
(Fahmi et al., 2021)	Quality of teaching	Vocational	The quality of teaching affects the work outcomes of graduates	Investment in vocational teachers
(Dahuri & Wantini, 2023)	Stakeholder engagement	Vocational	Ongoing collaboration enhances program sustainability	Participatory governance
(Usman et al., 2024)	Gender inclusion	Vocational	Women's participation increases	Affirmative action policies and special support
(Pahlevi et al., 2024)	Vulnerable groups	Vocational	Access for marginalized groups improves	Need for additional support
(Hosen & DR. SYAZA FARHANA BINTI MOHAMAD SHUKRI, 2023)	Integration of religious and general curriculum	Islam	Balance between academic achievement and moral development	Integrated curriculum model
(Ifani & Kartiwi, 2024)	Character building	Islam	Religious education strengthens ethical values and responsibility	Integration of values in policy
(Dostál & Hyánek, 2023)	National identity and system	Islam	Curriculum integration strengthens cohesion and identity	National standards alignment
(Thoha et al., 2023)	Islamic education and modernization	Islam	Balance between tradition and renewal	Contextual reform
(Khmous & Besim, 2020)	Social cohesion	Islam	Value-based education strengthens solidarity	Strengthening character education
(Hamami & Nuryana, 2022)	Juvenile delinquency	Islam	Character education reduces deviant behavior	Instilling moral values
Nwafor et al. (2024)	Citizenship participation	Islam	Students' social commitment increases	Value-based citizenship education
Faradisi & Anggara (2024)	Interfaith dialogue	Islam	Dialogue initiatives increase tolerance	Inclusive approach
(Rahmadin, 2025)	Social harmony	Islam	Religion-based education supports social integration	Inclusive policy support

The table confirms that secondary education outcomes impact not only the economic aspect but also the social and cultural dimensions. Therefore, policy reforms need to integrate job

readiness with strengthening values and character, so that secondary education truly contributes to holistic and sustainable human development.

Discussion

The findings from Tables 1 to 4 indicate that the success of universal secondary and vocational education reform is closely related to how the system is managed, particularly in regulating the relationship between public, private, and faith-based providers. In systems that devolve significant authority to regions, differences in financial capacity and management across regions often result in uneven outcomes (Brandt & Mkenda, 2020; Kyei et al., 2024). Conversely, when authority is overly centralized, the unique needs and conditions of regions can be overlooked, resulting in decreased community and stakeholder participation (Dewi, 2021). Evidence in Themes 1 and 2 shows that although enrollment increased significantly after the abolition of school fees (Chanimbe & Ayi-Bonte, 2025; Gruijters et al., 2024), socioeconomic disparities and differences in opportunities between men and women persist (Pereira, 2024; Tournier et al., 2025). Even a 60% reduction in household expenditure does not necessarily improve school sustainability (Omoeva & Gale, 2016). This confirms that educational management cannot rely solely on direct financial assistance.

Clear regulations and accountability mechanisms applicable to all types of providers have been shown to help improve quality and ensure equitable access (Esaku & Mugoda, 2023; Liu & Li, 2022). However, debates regarding funding of faith-based institutions and collaboration between the government and the private sector continue. Some argue that public funding is appropriate as long as educational quality is guaranteed (Ali et al., 2024; Graham et al., 2022). On the other hand, concerns arise regarding the potential exclusion of certain groups and differences in quality standards (Mtitu et al., 2023; Tarkowski et al., 2025). Integrating Islamic schools into the national system can strengthen social cohesion (Sanga, 2025), but also requires sensitivity to diverse values and cultures (Sule, 2024).

In terms of implementation, the success of the policy is largely determined by the availability of sustainable funding, teacher readiness and well-being, and the alignment of the curriculum with real needs. Budget constraints and minimal support for learning support activities weaken the policy's impact in rural areas (Mubanga et al., 2022; Mugenyi et al., 2025). The shortage of trained teachers also hampers the quality of learning, particularly in vocational education (Byiringiro et al., 2023; FAWEHINMI et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2024). Furthermore, a curriculum that is not aligned with the needs of the workforce can produce graduates who are less prepared to compete (Kibet, 2025). Therefore, a close relationship between funding, teacher readiness, and the curriculum is key to the policy's success.

Going forward, research needs to deepen comparative studies on the alignment of Islamic school curricula with national standards (Maganga et al., 2025; Nyang'ara & Nyakoe, 2024), assess the long-term outcomes of graduates (Sultana et al., 2025), and examine the influence of social, cultural, and economic factors on educational participation (Robertson, 2023; Sandip, 2023). Cross-national studies, such as those of Indonesia and Malaysia, could enrich understanding of effective integration models (Cantero et al., 2025). Furthermore, the views and involvement of teachers, parents, and the community need to be further investigated to ensure policies are truly responsive and inclusive of all groups (Roy & Madhu, 2023).

Overall, this discussion confirmed that increasing access is only the first step. Equitable and sustainable secondary education reform requires balanced management between centralization and devolution of authority, clear accountability for all providers, and strengthening overall implementation capacity.

Conclusion

This review concludes that universal secondary education policies are effective as an initial driver of expanded access, but are insufficient to achieve sustainable equity and quality. Several studies show increased enrollment following the elimination of school fees, but the impact is uneven for vulnerable groups. Gender disparities, rural-urban disparities, and socioeconomic inequalities persist because non-cost barriers such as social norms, domestic work requirements, indirect costs, and limited information remain strong in many contexts. Furthermore, rapid expansion without strengthening school capacity has the potential to undermine quality through overcrowding, limited resources, and stress on teaching staff.

In vocational pathways, policies are more likely to produce positive employment outcomes if supported by curriculum alignment with labor market needs, partnerships with industry, quality teaching, and an adaptive curriculum update system. However, vocational pathways also risk reinforcing social stratification if their majors tend to place students from low-income families on pathways that offer less mobility for further education. Therefore, policies on transition between pathways and recognition of learning outcomes are crucial to maintaining equal opportunities.

In a pluralistic education system, governance and accountability across providers are crucial. A clear regulatory framework, consistent minimum quality standards, and transparent funding mechanisms are necessary to ensure that expanded access does not widen inequalities. While Islamic-based schools have been shown to contribute to strengthening values, character, and social cohesion, empirical evidence on how universal secondary and vocational education policies specifically impact Islamic education providers remains limited.

Literature Gaps include: 1. A lack of studies explicitly distinguishing the impact of universal secondary and vocational education policies on Islamic-based schools compared to public and private providers. 2. A lack of evaluations that combine indicators of access, learning quality, and transition outcomes (employment/further education) simultaneously, particularly for vulnerable groups. 3. Limited evidence on the most effective policy mechanisms (financing, accountability, curriculum standards) in pluralistic education systems.

Further research directions include: 1. Cross-country and cross-provider comparative studies on the integration of Islamic school curricula with national standards, including certification recognition and transition pathways. 2. Long-term outcome evaluations (retention, learning outcomes, employment opportunities, and empowerment) with designs that can examine differences in impact by gender, socioeconomic status, and region. 3. Implementation research examining the interactions between sustainable funding, teacher availability and well-being, and curriculum alignment, particularly in vocational secondary education. 4. Governance studies assessing the most effective models of accountability and regulation across providers to ensure minimum quality while maintaining cultural sensitivity and social cohesion.

In summary, secondary education reforms aimed at achieving human development goals must go beyond achieving access. Equitable policies must combine expanding access, strengthening the capacity of schools and educators, improving governance, and designing general and vocational pathways that enable mobility and equal opportunity, including within the Islamic education ecosystem.

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