

The challenges of high stakes exit exams in higher education: A systematic literature review

Samson W. Teshome

Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

bedlusamson@yahoo.com

Abstract

This literature review covers the challenges of high-stakes exit exams in higher education, student performance outcomes, equity, and teaching. Exit exams, designed to assess students' readiness to graduate, have sparked a long-running debate on whether they are fair and effective. This review integrated data from different bodies of literature in order to elucidate the collective themes, including the inequitable effects on marginalized student groups, the potential for anxiety and stress and the uncertainty regarding signifier of student proficiency. The study consists of a systemic literature review of international peer-reviewed articles and educational policy reports written in the last 20 years. Some of the key findings were that while the intention behind exit exams is to ensure academic levels remain high, they can exacerbate inequalities that already exist, and may not accurately represent a student's level of knowledge and skill. The review recommends more fair assessment practices and alternative forms of assessment rooted in whole student development. It also discussed the implications of, these concerns for education policy and practice, particularly in terms of the need to priorities tertiary students' well-being in assessment design. This could mean using ongoing tests and other check-up methods with usual exit exams to better understand student skills. This article contributes to the ongoing debate regarding exit testing in higher education based on findings that may be additive to future research and policy aimed at equitable and effective testing in a multicultural educational environment.

Keywords: exit exams, higher education, student outcomes, educational equity, academic preparedness, student well-being

Introduction

The higher education space is constantly evolving and responding to changes in policy, public sentiment, and instruction. One of the main issues of our time is the controversy around exit exams. Such exams are indeed a last resort to evaluate how a student can perform according to someone or something's governance in obtaining a certification or graduating (it is mostly the example of the requirements and expectations of institutions) (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; Aristeidou et al., 2024). However, introduction of examinations for leaving school has provoked tremendous debates with restrictions due to assessments effectiveness, equity and impact on student achievement (Slomp et al., 2020, Teshome, 2024). Exit examination is also designed to demonstrate that graduates have the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in their careers (Aniley, 2023; El-Hassan et al., 2021). The tests have been promoted to be a standardized yardstick of student achievement and accountability, and to guarantee academic rigor and quality control (Ackeren et al., 2012; Woessmann, 2018). In the age where employers are more interested in the ability to

think critically as well as just on-the-job competence, exit examinations are seen as the main link between academic preparation, and working demands (Fanjoy et al., 2005; Moore et al., 2021). Although exit exams are expected to improve, their use is not without criticism. Critics raise a number of issues about such tests, including fairness, accessibility and student stress (Baker, 2019; Benner, 2013). Research indicates that exit exams might disproportionately disadvantage students who are already in disadvantage situation and widen the differences in educational outcomes (Houchensen, 2023; Warren & Grodsky, 2009).

The high-risk context of such assessments can also induce high levels of anxiety damaging the performance and welfare of students (Merki, 2011; Nichols & Berliner, 2007) according to broader literature. In addition, whether exit exams really test student preparedness is another point of debate. Some researchers have questioned whether these tests truly measure a student's capabilities, which introduces issues of validity and reliability (Palmer et al., 2010; Siddiqui et al.,

2023). Furthermore, an emphasis on testing can detract from holistic educational principles, and may sacrifice thinking and problem-solving ability for memorization of information (Shepard, 2000; Yimer & Bishaw, 2023). This discrepancy between what gets measured and actual learning achievement is a complex conundrum for policy-makers and teachers (Dempster, 2012; Rosqvist et al., 2022). With these concerns in mind, a systematic literature review on exit exams is one of the best ways to learn about their impacts on the higher education (Teshome, 2024). The article adds to the larger body of research on exit exams which takes stock of what is known and identifies new patterns and critically reveals the impact of exit exams on student performance by weighing the pros against the cons (Ayenew & Yohannes, 2022; Piopiunik et al., 2013).

Methodology

This review used a systematic method for the selection and analysis of the literature: Search strategy: Wide-ranging searches were conducted in numerous bibliographic databases including JSTOR, Google Scholar and ERIC using terms: 'exit exams', 'higher education', 'student assessment' and 'educational policy'. The search resulted in 163 articles, 50 of which were duplicates and were eliminated. 113 were title and abstract screened and 73 were excluded for not satisfying the inclusion criteria. Forty articles were read in full text and 7 were excluded for lacking sufficient or appropriate data. In total, 33 articles constituted the final review. Inclusion Criteria: Studies that addressed the challenges of exit exams at the collegiate level were considered in covering the literature. Quantitative as well as qualitative research was included.

Exclusion criteria: Papers that focused either only on testing in high school and not on the passing of exit exams were not taken into account or papers without empirical evidence on exit exams were excluded. Relevant details including study design, sample size, findings and reviewer conclusions were extracted from selected studies. The quality of the studies was judged by a standard appraisal tool for reliability and validity of findings. The review questions guided the systemic review: What are the critical concerns, posed by the use of exit exams in colleges and universities and how do they impact student outcomes, equity considerations, and the college experience?

Results

Scrutiny of the exit exams conducted in the university context unveiled a complex terrain mapped by different form, function, and consequences across countries. Ackeren et al. (2012) used a descriptive case study of three German states to describe the divergent effects on German educational outcomes of low-stakes exit exams. Such tests, they wrote, could generate varying experiences and learning outcomes among students. Yimer and Bishaw (2023), also critically examined the challenges of implementing engineering education in Ethiopia, highlighting particularly about the demand for efficient quality assurance operation during the time of varied practice and resource deficiency in the Ethiopian institutions. Al Ahmad et al. (2014) investigated the issue using evidence from the United Arab Emirates and concluded that exit exams should be an important predictor of student performance because they measure preparedness. Aniley's (2023) comprehensive worldwide analysis confirmed the contribution of the exit exams in terms of employability and quality assurance of the international engineering programs, including reference to academics' opposition and logistical issues. Aristeidou et al. (2024) used UK survey to examine end user acceptance of interfaces and they found high satisfaction but worries about test integrity in online examination.

In Thailand, two researchers, Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022), looked into how exit tests change the way teachers teach and how students act. They found that the tests made teachers focus on teaching just what was needed to pass the test. In Ethiopia, Ayenew and Yohannes (2022) used both numbers and words to study the exit tests. They found mixed feelings about the tests and not enough tools to do the tests right. In the U.S., a study by Baker (2019) said that these tests could keep making it hard for students to succeed in higher education. A U.S. study by Benner (2013) found a link between exit tests and how students work together to learn. It showed that these tests could really shape how teens grow. Bishop (1999) wrote that having national exit tests could really help schools all over the world do better, but Bracey (2009) didn't agree with forcing these tests in America, saying they don't really help more students graduate. Carol and Brown (1994) looked at how exit tests for criminal justice lined up with what jobs needed in the U.S.

Moore et al. (2021) talked about how in U.S. nursing schools, having many start and end points in programs could help more students join in. Dehury (2017) saw medical exit tests in India as a way to check if students were ready to work, saying they were key for being sure about the quality.

Dempster (2012) looked at end-of-year tests in four African countries (South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia) and saw big differences in education achievements that showed a need for common methods. El-Hassan et al. (2021) studied how students feel about Lebanese civil engineering final exams and gave tips for better tests based on what students said. French (2021) talked about good and bad points of major final tests in America and Brazil and pushed for a mix of different test kinds. Hughes (2001) pointed out how exit tests in America link education to work needs at a conference. Houchensen (2023) in his American study, said that exit tests took care of culture, helping students who often get left out. Khan et al. (2023) researched how exit tests for pharmacy in India could raise work standards despite some pushback. Lanahan (2023) checked the political side of higher education in Georgia, showing how cheat risks hurt test trust. Leigh (2012) showed that exit slips in the U.S. help students learn better, while Merki's (2011) study in Germany found state tests boosted self-driven learning and motivation.

Fanjoy et al. (2005) looked at U.S. flight school final exams at college and noted their role in certifying skills. Palmer et al. (2010) in Australia, used real data to check new exam questions for key thinking skills. Piopiunik et al. (2013) in Europe found that main final tests linked to job market success, backing their use. Rosqvist et al. (2022) reviewed Finnish nursing exit tests, stressing the need for good testing tools. Siddiqui et al. (2023) did a detailed check on Indian pharmacy exit tests, marking them vital for pharmacy work growth. Slomp et al. (2020) compared Canadian exit test rules, noting bad effects on student involvement and learning. Finally, Teshome's (2024) deep global review of exit tests showed they must match education goals. From a study by the University of Munich, Germany and Woessmann (2018), they found central European final tests boost student scores, helping wider use. Warren & Grodsky (2009) saw that United State exit tests hurt failing students but barely help passing ones, needing

new ways to judge student work. Weir (2010) looked at how U.S. journalism schools handle start/end tests, showing issues with keeping tests fair and equal in varied courses.

Discussions

Global studies on exit exams show many issues such as how they vary by country, the pressure of education rules, and the need to fit with industry norms. Thus, there is a need to fix these to make exit exams better and fairer in higher learning everywhere. The review looked at key themes about the problems with exit exams:

Academic pressure: Students in many places feel a lot of stress and worry from big tests. Studies show that this stress hurts both their mental health and school results, making it hard for the test meant to check skills to truly see student success.

Equity issues: Worldwide research points to fairness problems in exit exams, mainly for ignored groups. Data from many countries show that students from these groups do poorly on these tests, raising questions about fair chances in education.

Curriculum alignment: Many have seen that exit exam content often does not match what is taught. Many teachers say that standard exit exams do not show the skills and knowledge they teach, leading to a mismatch in most education systems.

Institutional effect: The global look found that schools often struggle to use exit exams well. Factors like using resources well, training teachers, and getting admin help play big roles in how well these exams work in different countries.

Conclusion

The deep review of exit exam issues in higher education showed a tough scene that affects student results, school ways, and educational fairness. Though these exams should check if students are ready to graduate, the review shows they do not meet these goals. A big worry is the academic pressure these tests put on students. The strong test nature can bring more worry and stress, hurting both mental health and school success. Schools should care for student well-being by adding support to lessen these issues, so tests do not block school success. Fairness is also a big worry in exit exam debates. Studies show that tests hit disadvantaged groups hard. This makes us question how fair and true exit exams are as

ways to judge student skills. For fairer learning, teachers and rule makers must closely look at the hurdles these students face and think of other ways to test that give everyone a fair chance.

Not linking courses and exit exams also makes things worse. Teachers often say that standard tests don't really show what their courses teach. This can only be fixed by working together to match tests with what students should learn, making exams more related to real job skills. Schools also need to really support using exit exams well. Solving issues with resources, training staff, and getting admin help is key to good testing ways. Schools must invest in teacher training and have enough resources to help both students and staff with testing. Lastly, this review calls for a joined way to check learning. Decision makers should mix ongoing tests and other ways to check learning with exit exams to better see student skills. Moving towards more complete checking might be needed to make learning places that support ongoing improvement over big tests.

Policy and practice implications

Because exit exams have many tricky issues, policymakers should aim for a broad way to check learning. This could mean using ongoing tests and other check-up methods with usual exit exams to better understand student skills. By focusing on regular feedback and improvement, rather than just big tests, there is a need to make a less scary learning place.

Future research direction

The review points to more research needs to understand the long term effects of exit exams on institutions and student success. Longitudinal studies might give important info on how these exams shape education paths over time. Also, research that tells the stories of different student groups can help build testing ways that include everyone.

References

Ackeren, I., Block, R., Klein, E., & Kühn, S. M. (2012). The impact of statewide exit exams: A descriptive case study of three German States with differing low stakes exam regimes. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 20.

Al Ahmad, M., Al Marzouqi, A. H., & Hussien, M. (2014). Exit exam as academic performance indicator. *Turkish*

Online Journal of Educational Technology, 13(3), 58-67.

Aniley, A. A. (2023). Comprehensive review on exit examination strategies and its role for enhancement of quality assurance and employability opportunity in engineering and technology programs. *IETE Journal of Education*, 64(1), 41-46.

Aristeidou, M., Cross, S., Rossade, K.-D., Wood, C., Rees, T., & Paci, P. (2024). Online exams in higher education: Exploring distance learning students' acceptance and satisfaction. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 40(1), 342-359.

Athiworakun, C., & Adunyarittigun, D. (2022). Investigating washback effects on teaching: A case study of an exit examination at the higher education level. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 15(2), 776-801.

Ayenew, E., & Yohannes, A. G. (2022). Assessing higher education exit exam in Ethiopia: Practices, challenges and prospects. *Science Journal of Education*, 10(2), 79-86.

Baker, D. J. (2019). Pathways to racial equity in higher education: Modeling the antecedents of state affirmative action bans. *American Educational Research Journal*, 56(5), 1861-1895.

Benner, A. D. (2013). Exit examinations, peer academic climate, and adolescents' developmental outcomes. *Journal of School Psychology*, 51(1), 67-80.

Bishop, J. (1999). Are national exit examinations important for educational efficiency? *Swedish Economic Policy Review*, 6, 349-398.

Bracey, G. (2009). *Mandatory exit exams discourage graduation* / semantic scholar. Retrieved November 19, 2024, from <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Mandatory-Exit-Exams-Discourage-Graduation-Bracey/dac2b9759212eb72fbd45520fe9f06d1a6e768c5>

Carol A., V., & Brown, M. F. (1994). The development of an exit examination in criminal justice for graduating seniors: A case study. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 5(1), 49-57.

Dehury R., S. J. (2017). "Exit exams" for medical graduates: A guarantee of quality? *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*. Retrieved November 19, 2024, from

- <https://ijme.in/articles/exit-exams-for-medical-graduates-a-guarantee-of-quality/?gallery=html>
- Dempster, E. (2012). Comparison of exit-level examinations in four African countries. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 33, 55-70.
- El-Hassan, H., Hamouda, M., El-Maaddawy, T., & Maraqa, M. (2021). Curriculum-based exit exam for assessment of student learning. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 46(6), 849-873.
- Fanjoy, R. O., Young, J. P., & Dillman, B. G. (2005). Exit exams for college flight programs: Redundant activity or certification of competency? *The Collegiate Aviation Review International*, 23(1), 24-31.
- French, J. H. (2021). Race, racism, and affirmative action in Brazil and the United States. *Latin American Research Review*, 56(4), 988-997.
- Houchensen, D. (2023). "Stakes is high' culturally relevant practitioner inquiry with African American students struggling to pass secondary reading exit exams." *Urban Education*, 48(1), 92-115.
- Hughes, F. (2001). The Achilles heel of university industry partnerships. In *2001 Annual Conference Proceedings*, 6.980.
- Khan, H., Sebu, Gaur, P., Kumar, A., & Rahman, M. ur. (2023). Pharmacy exit exam for the upliftment of profession of pharmacy practice in India: A review. *International Journal of Pharma Professional's Research (IJPPR)*, 14(4), 107-112.
- Lanahan, B. (2023). Corruption, tutoring, and higher education entrance exams. In *Higher education as politics in post-rose revolution Georgia* (pp. 107-115). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Leigh, S. R. (2012). The Classroom Is Alive with the Sound of Thinking: The Power of the Exit Slip. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 24(2), 189-196.
- Merki, K. M. (2011). Effects of the implementation of state-wide exit exams on students' self-regulated learning. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 37(4), 196-205.
- Moore, L. C., Goldsberry, J., Fowler, C., & Handwerker, S. (2021). Academic and nonacademic predictors of BSN student success on the HESI exit exam. *CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing*, 39(10), 570-577.
- Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2007). *Collateral damage: How high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*. Harvard Education Press.
- Palmer, E. J., Duggan, P., Devitt, P. G., & Russell, R. (2010). The modified essay question: Its exit from the exit examination? *Medical Teacher*, 32(7), e300-e307.
- Piopiunik, M., Schwerdt, G., & Woessmann, L. (2013). Central school exit exams and labor-market outcomes. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 31, 93-108.
- Rosqvist, K., Koivisto, J.-M., Vierula, J., & Haavisto, E. (2022). Instruments used in graduating nursing students' exit exams: An integrative review. *Contemporary Nurse*, 58(5-6), 393-413.
- Shepard, L. A. (2000). The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture. *Educational Researcher*, 29, 4-14.
- Siddiqui, A. W., Singh, D., Samanta, R., Das, A. M., & Chhetri, P. (2020). Evaluating the role of pharmacy exit exams in advancing pharmacy practice in India: A comprehensive review. *Latin American Journal of Pharmacy*, 42(10), 1-11.
- Slomp, D., Marynowski, R., Holec, V., & Ratcliffe, B. (2020). Consequences and outcomes of policies governing medium-stakes large-scale exit exams. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 32(4), 431-460.
- Teshome, S. W. (2024). Exit exams in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Science Journal of Education*, 12(4), 71-76.
- University of Munich, Germany, & Woessmann, L. (2018). Central exit exams improve student outcomes. *IZA World of Labor*.
- Warren, J. R., & Grodsky, E. (2009). Exit exams harm students who fail them: And don't benefit students who pass them. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(9), 645-649.
- Weir, T. (2010). Pretest/posttest assessment: The use of an entry/exit exam as an assessment tool for accredited and non-accredited journalism and mass communication programs. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 65(2), 123-141.
- Yimer, A. M., & Bishaw, K. K. (2023). A review on implementation challenges and

measures of exit exam to enhance and assure the quality of engineering

education at Ethiopia HEIs. *Higher Education Research*, 8(6).