

Ethiopia's secondary school leaving examinations system: A glimpse inside its governance, management, and potential consequences

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Abstract

Nationally administered secondary school leaving examinations, or high school exit examinations, are instrumental in shaping students' futures, serving as a gateway to higher education, career opportunities, and personal growth. As pivotal milestones, these exams significantly influence students' opportunities and outcomes, making them a central focus of policy discussion. As a result, these examinations have been the focus of much policy debate. These examinations must be effectively administered and managed to ensure fairness, accuracy, and reliability in assessing students' knowledge and competencies. During the 2021–22 and 2022–23 academic years, Ethiopia's Ministry of Education and the National Educational Assessment and Examination Agency (NEAEA) relocated the administration of secondary school-leaving examinations from individual schools to public universities. Changing an examination system often requires different leadership and management skills, structures, and approaches than those needed for maintaining the familiar systems. The Ministry disclosed the students' terrible exam results but did not mention their management, governance, or the consequences of this assessment reform process. Despite the Ministry's claim that the 2022–23 academic year taught it some lessons, the outcomes did not indicate any improvement. This paper highlights key features of Ethiopia's secondary school leaving examinations and presents a framework for critically evaluating their management, governance, and potential outcomes of the reform process. By doing this, we might contribute to developing an impartial, trustworthy, and effective evaluation system.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 20 March, 2024

Accepted: 26 December, 2024

KEYWORDS

Ethiopia, secondary education assessment, examination governance, education management, education outcome

Introduction

Ethiopia's secondary education system, involving grades 9 to 12, plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic and professional trajectories. The system begins with two years of general secondary education, after which students who advance to grades 11 and 12 specialize in either natural sciences or social sciences. The Ethiopian secondary school leaving examination, administered at the end of Grade 12, is the primary criterion for entry into higher education. Although efforts to expand enrollment have yielded progress,

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/bdje.v25i1.7>



significant disparities in access and quality remain (Ministry of Education, 2021; Goshu & Woldeamanuel, 2019), particularly in rural areas, where students face heightened challenges due to resource limitations and systemic inequities (Jones et al., 2019). Other barriers, such as natural disasters, armed conflict, and the demand for child labor, exacerbate the situation. In particular, the lack of accessible secondary schools in rural areas is a critical issue, with these barriers disproportionately affecting girls (Devonald et al., 2021).

Secondary (high) school leaving examinations and the current situation in Ethiopia

Education systems worldwide increasingly rely on learning assessments to inform policymaking, drive reform initiatives, and improve teaching and learning practices (Cresswell, 2016). National secondary school leaving exams or high school exit exams are standardized tests that students must often pass in order to join universities (Tienken, 2011). According to Morgan (2016), it is not a good idea to evaluate teachers and schools only using high-stakes standardized testing because doing so creates several problems.

Since new exam administration and management was set up at public universities two years ago, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education has discovered a high student failure rate in the national secondary school leaving exams. However, a more thorough review of these exams reveals systemic cracks and tensions resulting from poor governance and management (AACRAO, n.d.; Tadesse, Hagos, & Gedamu, 2024).

According to the Ministry of Education's guidelines, secondary school students must generally achieve at least 50 percent and higher to pass the secondary school leaving examination. There might be a range of consequences for passing or failing exams. For example, while passing might be a requirement for graduation, failing can require remedial coursework or further attempts. Besides school facility issues, educators in Ethiopia face ongoing challenges with the timely distribution of textbooks to secondary school students. This delay, which typically extends until the fourth month of the academic year, affects the quality of education and causes frustration among students and teachers alike. For parents, the situation is equally concerning. Many express their disappointment when their children cannot access the necessary materials. The lack of textbook access exacerbates educational inequalities, particularly for students in rural communities who face additional barriers such as long commutes and fewer learning resources. Both parents and educators agree that the delays in textbook distribution create a significant gap in the education system, leaving students without the necessary tools to engage with the curriculum and meet academic expectations fully.

Governance and management of Ethiopia's secondary school leaving exams

Triggered mainly due to insufficient governance, Ethiopia's poorly governed secondary schools may not adequately prepare students for the secondary school leaving exams (Ministry of Education, 2021). As a result, students may not be prepared for the demands of the secondary school leaving exams, which may be the primary cause of their placement in the disproportionately failing categories. Inadequate preparation directly

correlates with poor exam outcomes. Research has shown that when students face gaps in foundational knowledge or are not exposed to a curriculum that aligns with the exam expectations, they are less likely to succeed (Schmidt et al., 2015; Triventi et al., 2016). A lack of focus on core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, coupled with insufficient practice on exam-style questions, leaves students vulnerable (Berliner, 2011).

Furthermore, due to inefficient management, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately affected by uneven access to resources, study guides, and exam-related support (Policy Studies Institute, 2024). Research has shown that this disparity widens the academic achievement gap. Furthermore, inefficient management can lead to underutilization of funds and interventions, compounding these issues (Bryk, 2002; UNESCO, 2021). Beyond academic outcomes, such inequities undermine students' confidence and perpetuate cycles of underachievement (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Exam scheduling, communication, and logistics were also poorly handled, which raised students' stress and anxiety levels and had an adverse influence on their performance and general well-being (Mikre et al., 2023). Personal accounts from students further illustrate the challenges faced due to the new examination management system. Many reported difficulties adjusting to the sudden changes in examination venues and schedules, compounded by a lack of clear communication from authorities. These experiences underscore the need for a more student-centered approach in examination management to mitigate stress and support better performance.

Both at the individual and school levels, constructive feedback is essential for ongoing progress. However, personal accounts from students, parents, and secondary school teachers highlight the challenges faced due to systemic inefficiencies resulting from ineffective governance. This also led to fewer opportunities for teachers and students to provide feedback. Informal discussions with secondary school teachers revealed significant concerns about the logistical and communicative challenges faced during the recent exit exam process; for example, the feedback given to the students and their hosting secondary schools was minimal to affect change and improvement. Inadequate governance also led to a lack of openness in the marking and administration of exams. This could undermine public confidence in the education system and raise questions about the reliability of exam results (Molla & Tiruneh, 2023, November 23; Staff Reporter, 2024, February 4).

Several experienced Ethiopian secondary school teachers highlight that, in recent years, school leaders have faced increasing demands due to various factors affecting their ability to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. First and foremost, the Ministry stated that there is doubt about the ability of the school leaders (Ministry of Education, 2023). Considering this, school leaders are forced to lead schools that prepare students for the recent complex problems facing the schools. Curriculum developers, assessment experts, and educational experts work together to produce secondary school leaving exams. As we saw in our lived experiences within the system, they are periodically evaluated and modified to ensure the exams remain relevant and aligned with evolving educational requirements. Parents, teachers, and community members are among the stakeholders that education officials regularly consult when making decisions about high school exit exams. However, this was not the case with the new secondary school leaving exam administration implemented during the last two years in Ethiopia. Additionally, to promote accountability

and openness in the educational system, the results of secondary school leaving exams are made available to the public to develop public trust. However, under the existing system, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education fully hijacked the ownership and power of the reporting from the National Educational Assessment and Examination Agency (NEAEA), indicating the existence of role confusion and deprivation of autonomy.

The adverse consequences of Ethiopia's secondary school leaving exams

The consequences of secondary school leaving exams may differ depending on the policies of various educational systems and regions (Bosan, 2018; Camphuijsen et al., 2021). However, the most obvious effect is that getting a high school credential frequently requires passing these exams (Papay et al., 2010). If students fail the secondary school leaving exams, their options for further study may be limited. Since the exams are a key criterion for university admission, failing them can significantly hinder students' ability to pursue higher education (Clark & Martorell, 2014).

Secondary school leaving exams may disproportionately impact students from low-income families (Papay et al., 2010). Due to limited access to resources like tutoring and exam preparation, there may be a greater gap in the educational and economic attainment of these students (Holme et al., 2010). Some students who have trouble with secondary school leaving exams may even give up and drop out of school before starting (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2013). Students may experience elevated stress and anxiety due to the strain of their secondary school leaving examinations. Consequently, the student's well-being and mental health may suffer.

Secondary schools may concentrate more on teaching the test in an attempt to get students ready for these exams, which could mean curricula are narrowed, and exposure to a broader range of subjects and skills is limited (Turner, 2009). Although proponents of exams argue that they provide a uniform and unbiased assessment, critics argue that they might not be the best measure of students' overall abilities. For example, the National Education Association (NEA) notes that standardized tests are inaccurate, inequitable, and often ineffective at gauging what students actually know (Harris et al., 2011). They emphasize that these tests often fail to measure important skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities (Alcocer, 2019). Some contend that secondary school leaving exams might not accurately represent a student's abilities or potential. For example, a study's findings suggest that these exams may not fully capture a student's abilities or potential, as they are influenced by subjective factors such as self-concept and perceived value of the subjects, which can vary between male and female students (Kampa et al., 2020). Certain students who scored poorly on these exams might be exceptionally talented in other subjects, and these exams might not fully represent the range of student skills (Honor Society Foundation, 2023). Additionally, the idea that public universities should manage and administer secondary school leaving exams instead of secondary schools would be harmful to secondary school teachers, their practices, and their long-term commitment to the teaching profession (Rubin, 2011).

A feature of all examinations with high-stakes consequences for those taking them is that they tend to generate negative 'backwash' effects (Arthur, 2021). Students are constantly

preparing for examinations, creating a climate of heightened anxiety for both them and their parents. The intense pressure to perform well not only affects students but also places significant stress on schools. In extreme cases, this pressure can lead to tragic consequences. Alarmingly, more than one-third of Ethiopian secondary schools have failed to pass even a single student in the secondary school leaving examinations conducted over the past two years (AACRAO, n.d.). This raises a critical question: what impact does such a failure have on these schools?

Additionally, schools and teachers are inclined to concentrate on exams while neglecting curriculum components like extracurricular activities, oral communication, project work, and others that are not directly examined and do not improve exam scores. However, it's important to recognize that while these non-exam components may not directly improve exam scores, they play a crucial role in promoting well-rounded individuals who are well-equipped with skills essential for success in the real world. Participation in extracurricular activities has been linked to improved academic performance, higher standardized test scores, and better self-perception (Anjum, 2021; Seow & Pan, 2014). Curriculum narrowing is the term used to describe the phenomena where schools and teachers prioritize tested subjects over untested ones (Joseph et al., 2011). This approach often arises in environments with high-stakes standardized testing, leading educators to prioritize content likely to appear on exams (Berliner, 2011). As a result, the arts and physical education would not get as much attention, which could deprive students of a well-rounded education.

In addition to the above, there is also the question of the teachers' capacity. The ministry indicated that most secondary school teachers cannot pass the competency exams prepared by the Ministry (Ministry of Education, 2023). Recent studies and reports highlight significant challenges in the competency levels of secondary school teachers in Ethiopia. Research indicates that many teachers struggle to pass competency exams administered by the Ministry of Education (Ahmed et al., 2024). This low competency adversely impacts student academic performance, underlining the need for targeted interventions. To address these concerns, the Ministry has introduced a licensing and relicensing system that includes competency assessments for teachers, aiming to improve the overall quality of education (Ministry of Education, 2023). Surrounded by many problems, students will be forced to study customized and exam-fashioned materials and even previous years' exam papers (Gashaye, 2021).

Improving the governance and management of secondary school leaving exams

In his seminal work, Fullan (2016) emphasized the complexities of implementing meaningful and lasting change in the education system. Additionally, he offers an all-inclusive framework for comprehending and overseeing educational change at various levels, encompassing classrooms, schools, regions, and wider policy settings. Strong educational systems must have high-quality learning assessment systems to track and enhance students' progress (Hauser & Heubert, 1999; Stiggins, 2017). To guarantee their sustainability and efficacy, it is crucial to routinely check and evaluate learning assessment systems' actual state and progress (Care et al., 2018).

According to global experience, educational reform initiatives emerge when stakeholders are dissatisfied with the negative consequences of secondary school exit exams. Ethiopia's National Education Assessment and Examinations Agency (NEAEA) is a legitimate body established by the Council of Ministers Regulation No. 260/2012 E.C (Council of Ministers Regulation No. 260/212), an essential component of assessment reform under the Ministry of Education. Nonetheless, regarding Ethiopian educational systems and schools, no action has been taken in reaction to the disastrous results of students' excessive failure in secondary school leaving examinations over the previous two years.

Ethiopian scholars suggested the separation of the NEAEA from the Ministry of Education based on empirical evidence (Chala & Agago, 2022), but nothing has happened so far. A multifaceted approach involving educators, legislators, administrators, and the community is crucial to addressing the challenges of poor governance and management and delivering fair, transparent, and efficient secondary school leaving exams.

A significant positive correlation exists between improved student outcomes and higher management scores (Hitt et al., 2017; Marzano & Marzano, 2003). Specifically, a study found that student results rise by 0.2 to 0.4 standard deviations (SD) for every one standard deviation (SD) increase in the managerial indicator (Pinto, 2016).

There is an expectation that examinations will run smoothly without cause for complaint and that examination results will always be accurate and error-free. In Norway, the adoption of standardized testing as a neutral tool to improve education quality and ensure equitable learning outcomes has led to the institutionalization of test-based accountability within the education system (Camphuijsen et al., 2021). Administering examinations is logistically complex, and there are many points at which decision-making errors can occur. Our lived experience in the system highlights one such challenge: securing dormitories and food services, which was time-consuming and introduced unnecessary difficulties for students. Additionally, the examinations relied heavily on temporary personnel, which may have compromised the efficiency and consistency of the process. Furthermore, the stringent control measures imposed at the universities—ranging from security at the main gate to supervision in the exam halls—seemed to create undue pressure on students, adding to the stress of an already high-stakes situation.

Effective management and governance of secondary school leaving exams are necessary to assess student preparedness and promote educational equity. A well-structured examination system ensures that all students, regardless of their background and circumstances, have equal opportunities to demonstrate their competencies, thereby supporting fair access to higher education and employment opportunities (Moss et al., 2008).

Prioritizing standardized content, accountability, transparency, and inclusion will ensure that the secondary school leaving exam achieves its objectives and reduces unexpected consequences. Collaboration between legislators and clear direction for exam administrators and educational stakeholders is required to improve these exams continuously. One of the main components of national reform agendas is the expectation that teachers will use data on student outcomes to enhance their instruction (Datnow et al., 2012). However, the results obtained over the past two years clearly show teachers' and schools' outcomes without analysis. Hence, teachers must be proficient in data analysis, interpretation, and usage to make well-informed judgments about how to raise student achievement on leaving exams.

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