

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLE**The Rationale and Significance of University-based Grade 12 National Examination Management Approach Implemented in Ethiopia: Stakeholders' Perspectives**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the rationale and relevance of university-based national examination management approach being experimented in Ethiopia. Using qualitative research approach and a cross-sectional study design, the article analyzed stakeholders' perspectives. Data obtained from the Ministry of Education (MoE), Educational Assessment and Examinations Service (EAES) university officials, educational bureaus of the regions and city administrations, supervisors and invigilators were thematically analyzed. It was found that the school-based national examination management approach fell short of relevance from the stakeholders viewpoints. It is highly criticized among most stakeholders and searching for a new exam management approach was strongly justified. Therefore, the university-based approach was tentatively accepted as a reform for the national examination crises management. The relevance of the new approach is rooted mostly in the need for averting the negative consequences of the growing examination stealing and cheating practices prevailing in the country, and for its perceived positive outcomes in the future. Hence, the university-based approach is not taken for granted as the best one and the chance of bringing back to the school-based approach with some modifications is not zero. Searching for evidence-based and context-fit grade 12 national examination management approach remains an urgent homework for the MoE and EAES in collaboration with the key stakeholders and partners. We recommend that the MoE, EAES and key stakeholders ought to rely on evidence-based and a contextualized management approach to solve the grave examination stealing and cheating related challenges.

Keywords: Examination management approach, rationale, significance, stakeholders' perspectives, University-based approach

INTRODUCTION

University entrance national examination is of high importance in education (Zhang et al., 2014) and for a country at large (Davey et al., 2007; Jacob & Lar, 2001; Nguyen & Yooncheong, 2022; Yongbo, 2020). The examination shapes the pedagogical practices of secondary education and determines future employment opportunities because it is the main route to access to and graduate from university education (Yongbo, 2020; Davey et al., 2007). It also has effects on students' learning experiences

(Nguyen & Yooncheong, 2022). Examination malpractices in general (Jacob & Lar, 2001; Maheka et al., 2020), and examination cheating in particular (Khodaieaet et al., 2011; Solomon, 2017) challenge the quality of education and thereby the development of a country by infiltrating unqualified candidates to universities (Shauri, 2014; Bifwoli, 2020) and inculcating bad behaviors (like cheating and stealing) among graduates (Zhang et al., 2014).

Factors of examination cheating are multiple; some are structural or systemic (Omebe, 2014) and others are interpersonal like peer influence (Diego, 2017; Claudio & Tonello, 2017). Worldwide, cheating in examinations has become one of the most serious problems that many countries are facing and attempt to manage using different reform approaches. Studies conducted in different African countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Zambia and South Africa report this fact (Shauri, 2014; Bifwoli, 2020), which also applies to Ethiopia (Nigussie et al., 2023; Lemma and Menna, 2022; Wondifraw, 2021).

The fairness, objectivity, equality and efficiency of the examination systems, their management practices and the results need to be reviewed (Davey, Lian and Higgins, 2007; Nguyen and Yooncheong 2022; Yongbo, 2020). Lemma and Menna (2022) recommended a gradual shift from booklet exam formats to online-based exam practices for Ethiopia. According to these authors, poor examination preparation, administration, and scoring procedures, and examination malpractices have become major sources of concern. These serious worries are shared by a growing number of stakeholders including authorities, teachers, school administrators, concerned citizens, parents and employers. These challenges have posed a threat to quality education, and the image of education system has been severely tarnished partly as a result of the exam malpractice which has plagued the country's educational institutions.

In response to the increasing examination cheating in Ethiopia (Lemma and Menna, 2022; Wondifraw, 2021), the MoE and EAES introduced a university-based national examination management approach in 2022, shifting from the previous school-based practice. The shift could be considered radical given the involvement of major changes with regard to engagement of students and other relevant actors in the examination management (Nigussie et al., 2023).

Any examination management may have limitations and require systematic evidence for improvement. Therefore, ensuring the rationale and relevance of an examination management deserve due consideration. The new exam management approach of Ethiopia worth appraisal not only to understand the intervention but also to indicate alternatives. Given that university-based exam management approach is new, little is known about the rationale and relevance of the reform. Exploring the bases of justification (rationale) and the importance (relevance) for the new university-based national examination management from stakeholders' perspectives is very decisive. The significance of this study emanates from the urgency of moving towards a workable national examination management as suggested by Nigussie et al., (2023) and to understand stakeholders' interests, preferences, experiences and suggestions as solutions for reducing the exam cheating and stealing in the future. These in turn imply stakeholders' support and participation, and sustainability of the intervention. The authors believe that this study generated eye-opening findings that inform policy makers, implementers and beneficiaries or survivors. To meet these general purposes of reducing exam cheating and stealing, the study aimed to answer the following questions: 1) What are the rationale (perceived causes) for shifting to the new national examination management approach? 2) How relevant (perceived importance) is the new exam management from the key stakeholders' perspectives?

Theoretical framework: Complexity Theory

Complexity Theory or complexity sciences have been used to explain biological systems (Nordtveit, 2007), and modern complexity theory has its roots in general systems theory (Synder, 2013). Nordtveit (2007) recommends the use of Complexity Theory for a better understanding of development processes, and development analysis should focus on the society (and stakeholders) as a system of inertia and change. Plessis (2012) writes that complexity theory is well suited as a lens to research education reforms and argues that it enables to explain education as a whole system perspective, the contexts of the different elements of the system, and the nonlinear nature of the causes and effects of educational reform. Scholars in the field suggest involving multiple stakeholders,

knowledge-sharing among relevant structures and moving toward feedback-driven adaptive reform as enabling factors in the reform process (Snyder, 2013).

Educational reform has been increasingly practiced across almost all countries. Education reform programs are multifaceted; the processes can be consensual or controversial; and their results can be desirable or not. Educational reform is a political work that can only be understood appropriately in a historical and sociocultural perspective (Levin, 2001). Synder (2013, p.6) strengthens the point saying "Viewing governance issues in isolation and seeking reductionist approaches targeting specific policy areas or pedagogical changes is unlikely to yield positive, sustainable change on a large scale". Zhang et al., (2014) also state that understanding the examination management comprehensively is advantageous. Rescher (2014, p.85) also calls for avoiding oversimplification which refers to simplifying matters beyond the warrant of the functional requisites of the particular situation at hand. Oversimplification undermines knowledge and it involves the omission of relevant details (Firestone, 2019, p.397).

Complexity theory also suggests a movement towards bottom-up development and change (Morrison, 2006). The concern of democratic decision-making is another important point given due emphasis in this theoretical framework because one-sided power exercise might cause a fundamental and serious problem in achieving a pedagogical goal and making education system democratic. Education system is considered as a better place where democratic values and practices are modeled, learned and exercised although democratic policy-making tends to be very complex, multi-variant, and time-consuming process in nature (Hyu-Yong, 2018; David, 1998).

It is important to ensure that the examination reform is effective and the management is of standard (Zhang et al., 2014), and implementing complexity theory principles helps to achieve positive result, (Snyder, 2013). Yet, reform process and its outcomes are influenced by the degree of commitment to a given program. Reform programs are justified on the basis of the outcomes they will yield, but their outcomes might be different from or more than those intended by advocates or feared by opponents (Levin, 2001). In this article, complexity theory is employed as a theoretical framework to analyze the first university-based grade 12 national examination management approach in Ethiopia as an educational reform and its implementation processes and outcomes as complex phenomena.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Study Setting

This study was a countrywide inquiry covering all nine regions established by the time of the study and the two city administrations in Ethiopia except Tigray National Regional State, which was excluded because of security problems during the fieldwork. Ethiopia is a Federal state structure currently constituting 12 regional states and two city administrations. The specific sites for data collection were MoE, EAES, public universities including students' clinics and education bureaus in regional cities and city administrations. All universities except those in Tigray served as centers for the grade 12 national examination administration; they hosted students, supervisors, and previous and current invigilators. The regional/city administration education bureaus actively participated in the process of facilitating students' transportation to and from the university campuses. Students entered the campuses two days earlier than the commencement of the exam and stayed in dormitories. Students were not allowed to leave the campuses until they completed the examinations. Universities were under strong security control mainly by the Federal police forces, and university employees who had not been assigned for different roles related to the examination were not allowed to enter compounds.

Study approaches and data collection methods

We used qualitative research approaches: in-depth interviews and review of secondary sources including printed and audio-visual materials. Officers and experts from EAES, regional/city administration education bureaus, students, invigilators and supervisors, and representatives of public universities in all regions except those in Tigray Region participated in the study. Participants of the study were recruited through purposive and convenient sampling techniques and permission from administrative bodies were secured. A total of 63 in-depth formal interviews were conducted with the

selected participants during the main fieldwork. Accordingly, 12 university officials, 11 university clinic health professionals, 10 regional/city administration education bureau officials, 10 regional/city administration education assessment experts, six current invigilators, three current supervisors, three previous invigilators/supervisors, three students, three school directors and two EAES experts participated in the in-depth interviews. Moreover, relevant documents such as examination implementation guidelines, official reports, press release and news, most of which obtained from the MoE and EAES, were thoroughly reviewed. Therefore, the study was based on a combination of 1) primary data collected from the key stakeholders through face-to-face interviews, and informal discussions with different actors in the exam management like university staff who participated as invigilators in different parts of the country and observations of exam settings wherever possible; 2) review of grey and published secondary sources.

Data Analysis

The interview guides were prepared in English and translated into Amharic. Interview guides and document analysis checklist were employed; the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and those collected in Amharic were translated into English. Field notes were taken during or after the interviews, discussions and observations. Thematic analysis supplemented by content analysis for the secondary materials were employed. Interpretation of the findings engaged empirical findings of other literature and were informed by the complexity theory as a theoretical lens. Themes were identified using open, axial and selective coding process, and presented based on elements of the research question, that is, rationale and relevance of the university-based grade 12 national examination management approach. Findings were presented along with selected quotations of the study participants' responses, their descriptions and explanations for their meanings.

Ethical Considerations

The proposal was ethically cleared by the Research Ethics Board of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at Jimma University (CEBS 36/2015; 24/02/2015 E.C.) for the research project entitled "*An Appraisal of and Lessons from the New Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination Management Processes*". Support letter was also obtained from the Office of the Vice President for Research and Community Services. A team of trained data collectors generated the data. All formal interviews were made at workplaces, and each interview took an average of one hour. Verbatim transcription and then translation into English were conducted by the researchers. The study participants were informed about the objectives of the study and potential risks of participating in the study, and consent for their willingness to participate in the study was sought. No personal names and other identifiers were used in the analysis and in the quotes. Confidentiality and anonymity of the evidences were ensured throughout the data gathering, analysis and research report.

RESULTS

This section presents the rationale and relevance of the new ESSLCE management from the perspectives of different stakeholders including the MoE, EAES, public universities, regional education bureaus, and examination administrators (invigilators and supervisors). The section has two major sub-sections. The first sub-section analyzes the rationale for anew exam management approach as necessity in response to gaps identified in the previous national exam management and the subsequent national educational crisis. The second sub-section specifically deals with the relevance of the new university-based exam management approach.

Rationale of a new exam management approach as a necessity

"Academic cheating has become a serious nation-wide problem to the extent of being considered normal culture" (University Official 8).

Why a new exam management was sought at this point in time was the central question this sub-section attempted to answer. A general response to the question could be fairly summarized as "looking for a new exam management approach was a necessity" and the details are presented as follows.

Exam stealing and cheating has become a national agenda

Representatives of nearly all stakeholders unanimously believe that a new national exam management approach is quite necessary for Ethiopia mainly because the country is under threat partly because of poorly managed national examinations. For most of them, exam management approach and its results determine development, and it is even a matter of survival as a country. Most of their justifications for seeking a new exam management approach are drawn from their retrospective evaluation of the past defective practices, mainly exam cheating and stealing, of national exam management approach and the subsequent negative results on the quality of education and beyond as believed by the stakeholders. According to a press release by the MoE on the preparation of the new ESSLCE management, exam administration has faced several challenges and problems whereby mainly stealing and cheating have become a hot national issue since the last decade. According to the Ministry, unless the problem is urgently resolved, its consequences on the entire society will be enormous. The press release stresses that:

In the past seven and eight years, exam administration was highly corrupted with features of exam stealing and cheating behavior of students. This became an issue of critical discussion across the country. As a result, in the past two years, we were thinking on how to solve the problems of exam stealing and cheating. Exam cheating is not only an issue of students but also a matter that influences the whole society. Unless we create a condition in which every student gets marks based on one's effort and ability, the condition of the country's education and exam administration will get worse and worse (MoE, 2022).

Participants from EAES also confirmed that exam cheating was reportedly common in previous years according to observation reports they received from invigilators and supervisors, research evidences and patterns of students' exam results. The concern of the Ministry and the Services is also shared by representatives of the regional education bureaus and universities which also strongly support the search for new national exam management approach and practices. They emphasized the central importance of education for inter-generational development that would be realized when the system, including exam management is free from corruption. The following quotes, for example, illustrate this issue:

We were accepting students who could not qualify to join universities, but capable students were not able to join universities because of exam cheating given the previous exam management system was not right(UO 1).

Another participant added that:

Exam cheating has already become a national concern and created many problems, including social crises. Therefore, having a cheating-free examination scenario that creates a belief that makes cheating a taboo is necessary (UO 3).

An important point that should not be overlooked in discussions about exam cheating is that the practice is not a new or even a very recent phenomenon in Ethiopia, as it is elsewhere; rather, its extent and features have been increasing and its consequences have become more damaging on multifaceted socioeconomic and political dimensions. A study participant recalls one's past observation and narrated it as follows.

In fact, I remember that exam cheating was common even when I was at school. There were school directors and some teachers who let their students cheat. We used to hear such things though it could not be exaggerated. This practice of letting students of one's school cheat has eventually worsened year after year and now has reached its peak. Some areas/schools which in reality did not have any resources to ensure quality education have become top scorers. This has been evaluated and a change was proposed (REBO 21).

Similarly, a university official reminded, "Of course, it is not just right now that we understood the students had nothing when they joined universities. This has been a problem but we have seen the signs very well, a problem that could be solved" (UO 1). In view of the abovementioned historical drop, an interviewee from a regional bureau (REBO 23) emphasized that exams were stolen along the ways to their destinations or the districts and at respective schools after much logistic costs were

incurred. Accordingly, “*There had been enormous cheating practices resulting in unfair students’ results that led to searching for a new exam management approach*” (REBO 23). The study participant also noted that the advancement of mobile technology and extensive usage of social media further complicated the exam stealing and cheating techniques that makes close control against the practices a necessity. One participant precisely described the previous exam management approach as corrupted: “*The exam management system was so corrupted that even unprepared students had been scoring high in exams*” (REBO 30). Another participant substantiated the above point with a similar line of argument saying:

The previous exam management approach brought abnormal competition among secondary school level institutions. We could not evaluate our secondary level institutions by national evaluation standard. Those who performed well with their efforts could not score good result; whereas those who performed less got higher scores in the national exam (REBO 27).

According to some of the study participants, the previous exam management approach created unhealthy competition among regions and educational institutions, and it was used as a tool of conspiracy to mobilize student protests by circulating misinformation that the exam was stolen in other regions. Therefore, exam management has become a political and security issue. According to REBO 23, exam stealing involved attacking the security forces at times. The MoE also reminded the presence of violence against the police: “*In the previous academic year, 13 members of the police forces were killed while they were accompanying exams to the exam centers*” (MoE on ETV Key Mesmer Program, October 27, 2022). A participant from EAES further narrated consequences of the past exam management approach as follows:

Exam stealing and cheating have created discrepancies among regions and affected the uniformity of the exam management at national level, negatively affecting students and the quality of education. As a result, the decision was made to stop this, make students self-reliant in passing the examination, allow only the able students to join universities, and generally to prevent cheating.

Moreover, the rumor about exam stealing and cheating during exam administration disturbs clever students and the stealing gives more chance to low achievers than clever or medium students to join universities. A study participant expressed the issue as follows:

Passing exam by cheating and unfairly joining universities has become a common place to the extent that it was not the clever and medium students who could join universities, but the low achievers by cheating (REBO 23).

Another participant added:

Many students are joining universities without qualifying the requirements, but they are not successful at the universities. They do not compete enough even if they graduate from the universities. The very cause of this problem is exam cheating (REBO 21).

One more participant argued:

Cheating became the norm to the extent that some students changed their names legally, through the court, to be able to sit closer to clever students on the examination. The name change was done only for the sake of passing the examination. It was thus such reasons which necessitated change in the administration of the exam (REBO 23).

Other regional educational bureau representatives who participated in this study fairly shared the concerns and supported the idea of seeking for a new national exam management approach as a solution. They emphasized that the new approach should ensure uniformity across regions and ensure that exams are not stolen and/or cheated that implies the importance of control and supervision from the federal structures. The condition was also frustrating for teachers who observed the unfair and unexpected national exam results of their students. The study participants emphasized that seeking a new exam management approach is a collective interest, not merely that of the MoE or its leaders which was also emphasized in the press release and interviews of the Minister.

Diverse actors engaging in exam stealing and cheating

Several actors, including students, parents, teachers and school principals (REBO 24 and REBO 22), invigilators, educational and political leaders (MoE), security forces (EAES 1) and the general public were involved in normalization of exam stealing and cheating. The media, the social media in particular, has also contributed a lot in the normalization process. For instance, the following study participants noted:

Some examiners played roles for the inflated results (REBO 27).

We have been challenged by a cadre-sponsored exam cheating, or you may call it a leader-sponsored cheating. This is to mean that leaders would say 'let students in our areas pass', which is a foolish practice (REBO 21).

If the management of institutions does not cooperate in letting the students copy from each other, the community members create different pressure. This public pressure enforces every structure in the education sector to be part of the problem of students' dependency and violation of exam ethics (REBO 27).

These are clues that show that key actors in the education system also took part in exam stealing and cheating in an organized manner. This claim could further be substantiated by the views of other study participants. One said: *"The education leaders at all levels including the top management of regions up to woreda level had networks of exam cheating merely emphasizing competitions based on the number of students who pass the exam"* (UO 8). Previous supervisors also reported that parents focus only on their children's completion of grade 12 and joining universities by whatever means and without having the ability. Besides, community members are much in favor of large number of students joining universities getting pass marks rather than the quality of the education they are provided. Thus, among the public, there is a tendency of adhering to students' cheating in exams than seeking improved quality of exam administration.

Exam security is an urgent need for practical reasons

The study participants also underlined that the very purpose of seeking a new exam management approach is to guarantee exam security (REBO 21-30). It was intended *"To know whether or not students pass the exam based on their abilities and knowledge"* (REBO 22). In a press release on the preparation of the new ESSLCE management, the Minister of the MoE announced: *"We are trying to let students pass the national exam and join universities with their own capacity without cheating. ... If we continue with the situation where we are now in respect of national exams, it will be more devastating and worsen."* The next argument is a typical response of the shared notions among the key stakeholders about the purpose of looking for a new exam management approach.

The first and major reason for the shift is to ensure the security of the examination. It is to ensure the proper and secured administration of the exam and to properly and genuinely measure the learning performances of students. The previous system was so difficult to ensure and control the security of the exam. The new exam management is introduced to ensure that every student is measured on the basis of one's own performance (REBO 30).

There are times when the least performing schools in the preceding years become the leading in the next academic year which is not supported by visible efforts made by the schools to ensure such improvement. Scores of students in some schools are unexpectedly inflated in one year and significantly drop in the next year which makes the performance evaluation unpredictable and interventions impossible. They witness that when top performer schools in the previous year are closely supervised in next exam, the size of students passing the exam definitely drops which implies exam cheating was there last year. That is, scores of students and the number or proportion of students passing exams have failed to indicate the actual performance of students and schools leaving the education system difficult for measurement. However, those students with better scores in the national exams regardless of how they get the scores have been joining universities. Therefore, universities have been sharing the negative consequences of exam stealing and cheating. A study participant touched on this point stating, *"Previous results were inflated and affected the university intake by raising the number of students passing the exam beyond their intake capacities"* (UO 3). Another participant shared his/her observation of university students as:

We have seen that students were coming to universities without anything at all. They simply join universities while they have nothing at all. That means, they complete high school and join us copying from others. They come here cheating exam, and they graduate passing through lots of sufferings, or else they could be dismissed. They won't be successful in their career even if they graduate, given they do not have competence (UO 1).

However, it is imperative to ask the following basic questions with regard to seeking a new exam management, questions which are implied in views of the study participants and that emerged as concerns of the researchers. The first question is: What is/are the root cause/s for the exam ethics violation: in terms of students, exam settings and stakeholders' contributions? This question demands evidence-based responses about the level of interventions (by individuals, groups and systems) to bring the desired change. On the other hand, the second question goes: Is the need for change real, institutional and sustainable? Some study participants suspect the sustainability of the exam control interventions and consider the current anti-exam cheating movement as a political discourse with little commitment of the key actors. The central point of this critique is that most of the education sector leaders who are blaming the past exam management approach were actors of the same themselves. The question also calls for a well thought, systematic and organized search for functional exam management approach.

Perceived relevance of the university-based exam management as an experiment

For most stakeholders, the university-based exam management approach is mainly seen as an experiment. However, there are varieties of justifications for the perceived relevance of the approach in accordance with the scopes and orientations of arguments.

Retrospective justifications: undoing the past exam cheating

Using universities as exam centers by transporting all students from home to campuses is not only a new but also a unique experience to Ethiopia. Shifting the exam center to universities is widely considered by the study participants as a remedy to avert the previous faulty exam management. To begin with, the MoE justified the shift from school-based exam management to using universities as exam centers as: *"The previous education and exam assessment practices were distorted; hence the current approach is the first measure taken against the previous distortions"* (MoE, 2022, press release about exam results). The Minister underlined the point saying, *"The new exam management system is thought to undo the previous practice in which schools, teachers, school principals, regional-level authorities and politicians have often been implicated for encouraging exam malpractice"* (MoE on EBC Key Mesmer program, October 22, 2022). In its official report, the Ministry added, *"Our Ministry made irreversible decision to break the past processes. For implementation of the decision, it decided that the exam should be given in universities by university staff"* (MoE, Exam Implementation Report, October 2022). Therefore, the MoE held a strong position to give the exam in universities. The EAES also reported that the exam cheating and exam stealing has become a chronic problem involving most stakeholders that necessitated shifting the exam centers from schools to universities.

Students, teachers, school principals, invigilators, supervisors and other stakeholders, even including security forces got involved in exam cheating which became a very serious problem for the education system of the country. But when students travel to a distant place with new exam invigilators, supervisors and security forces, we believe that collaboration for exam cheating will be minimized as everything would be new for the students and also for others. Therefore, shifting the places of the examination, changing the type of exam invigilators and supervisors, and curbing other stakeholders' involvement in exam cheating were anticipated. That is why the examination was given at universities by university instructors (EAES 1).

Another official also emphasized involvement of the key stakeholders in exam cheating and stealing, and hence, the need for shifting the exam center as:

Regions, zones, woredas and schools began to unfairly compete over students' exam result hence to cooperate in the exam cheating and stealing practices. The regions and the schools were competing by the number of students who have passed and scored highest marks in the exam, and for this they, fully involved in violating the exam administration process.

Moreover, the local community and security forces were involving in this malpractice of exam cheating and stealing. At times and in some places, there were exam stealing practices earlier than the exam date, and this escalation of the problem required a solution. As a result, using universities became an alternative solution for the problem (EAES 2).

The idea is shared by other stakeholders at different degrees:

High scoring schools were strictly evaluated followed by strict control on the next exam administration and we worked on the exam ethics. We have clearly identified students' results for every subject. Students of some high performer schools in the previous exam were unable to score the pass mark in the next. Only one to five students got the pass mark in some schools. Therefore, according to our assessment and analysis of the MoE, shifting a place of exam was important and convincing (REBO 27).

Previous invigilators gave witness that district level leaders were demanding them to allow exam cheating and that they were working under pressure. Accordingly, the leaders made undue receptions for invigilators in exchange for favors from them; as a result, some invigilators took a stance to the extent of deciding not to invigilate due to the large extent of cheating. Especially after the introduction of mobile phone technology, although police took the responsibility of checking for mobile phones, phones were found in the exam rooms. The students took small size mobile phones in different parts of their body, or had two mobile phones, handed over one and took the other one to the exam rooms. In addition, the policemen were negligent in searching for mobile phones. There was loose control because everybody was interested in solely one's own district to record the highest share of students who passed the exam, so cheating among students was not considered as a wrong act. As a result, these previous invigilators also support the use of universities as exam centers to deter the exam cheating. Even some students share the reason and purpose of the new exam management; they understand it as a means to reduce cheating and create better environment for students.

The new exam management approach as crisis management strategy

Responses obtained from many study participants imply that using universities as exam centers was taken as a crisis management approach rather than as a well-studied vital strategy. That is, it was chosen with a sense of urgency as just a better method among the possible alternatives, not as a well thought and endorsed approach. Indicators for this claim include mismatches between universities' holding capacities and the number of students assigned to the universities. Similar mismatches occurred in transportation and other services including accommodation. This point is implicated in a which reads as, "*For the time being, there is a need to administer the national exam for all students in a fair way, and the students will get exam results based on their preparation, effort and ability*" (MoE, 2022). That is, the new exam management is an experiment in a sense that no consensus is reached to keep on using it in the upcoming years.

A study participant (REBO 21) also explained that even the first plan was to use digital technology to make the examination process safer. However, this did not succeed for many reasons. Moreover, moving students to universities in other regions was suggested by the Ministry; however, it was later replaced by the present approach. To him, the only plausible option in the current context was to administer the exams in nearby universities. The participant, like many others, does not see the new approach as perfect but it is much better than the school-based one which was in crisis. Therefore, administrating examinations at universities is considered as a temporary approach until the digital approach will be possible as it has been repeatedly declared by the Minister and other higher officials of the MoE. A participant supplemented the necessity of having a new exam management approach that ensures control against exam cheating but it is not necessarily university-based. His expression goes like:

Whether the exam is administered in universities or anywhere else, exam cheating should never be allowed to continue; it should never continue whatever challenge we may face. If the country is to be saved, exam control should be in place. We may have a different system in the future. Anyway, we need to make exam administration under close supervision and control (REBO 21).

Therefore, using universities as exam center is at best taken as an option or experiment with a possibility of looking for other better settings for the exam administration in the future. Until then, it should continue at any cost so long as it enables to control exam cheating.

Prospective justifications: promising prophecies

There are several prospective justifications about the university-based new exam management approach among different stakeholders. Such future-oriented optimistic views in justifying the new exam management approach are relative to the past experiences and largely perceived that they are informed by emerging results and expected impact on the education system. Among others, it is broadly viewed as a promising project to bring country-wide large-scale changes. One participant hopes what the next will be for the country as: *“I think the new exam management approach is intended to avoid exam cheating and improve quality of education so as to have a better, respected and developed country”* (UO 7). Another one extended the advantage to structural change saying, *“Introducing such changes would contribute to the country’s socioeconomic development by creating capable citizens”* (REBO 25). Similarly, UO 4 stressed that the exam management will have institutional and country level advantages. The new exam management approach is also marked as a turning point or a significant shift in the education system of the country.

Some participants are highly optimistic about the potential of the new exam management approach in eliminating exam stealing and cheating. A study participant put it as, *“Believing that the current examination management system would alleviate exam cheating, we actively cooperated in the process of this exam administration”* (UO 3). Others in the optimist camp further hope that the new exam management approach will have spillover effects and long-lasting positive impacts on students’ learning. The point goes, *“Shifting the exam center in the new exam management practice will bring a great paradigm shift on students to feel that tomorrow they will do the exam by themselves. It has a positive impact on students’ attitude in the future, i.e., it helps them to develop self-confidence”* (REBO 22).

The university-based exam administration is considered to have indirect positive contributions in improving the quality of education in general. UO (10) argued that the new exam management practice has advantages to improve the quality of education. Thus, it must continue in the future by overcoming the problems. Principals also see the university-based exam management as it is meant to improve quality of education, reduce interference, minimize unethical behavior of students, limit exposure to cheating practice and identify capable and competent students who can join universities. Supervisors and invigilators share views of the principals and other actors when it comes to the reasons for choosing universities as exam centers. Some also anticipated indirect advantages of using universities as exam centers in addition to reducing exam stealing and cheating. For example, REBO (22) argued that *“This practice may help students to understand what university life looks like prior to joining it. It also encourages students to be self-reliant, competitive and good citizens.”* That means, experiences of the new exam management shapes students’ future positively.

Evaluative justifications about the impact of the new exam management

Based on judgments that the first new exam management approach was successful, many study participants attempted to justify the relevance of the approach. Some reflect that the previous exam-related problems were already resolved in the new exam management approach implying that it is promising. One remarked as:

The decision was to protect exam cheating. Exam booklets had been released before the students sit for the exams and unknown exam answer keys were distributed during the previous university-entrance examinations which were not reported in this year’s exam administration (REBO 28).

The MoE describes the exam management as successful because it significantly reduced exam stealing and exam cheating that was fairly acceptable to all stakeholders. Hence, the university-based exam management approach was found better to reduce inappropriate favor and using the exam for political purposes. It also gave chance for students to have exposure to universities and the universities are informed about the students. Universities also got experience on how to recruit students through their own entrance exam in the future. The Ministry also believes that it created better environment by

protecting students and parents from social media misinformation and negative psychological problems as well portrayed in the discourses of its officials.

However, some participants witnessed that exam cheating was not totally eliminated but it was insignificant relative to the previous uncontrolled massive cheating. A university official also made similar reflection in his statement, “*I take the exam result as true. It really is a true result of the students. At some point, it is a must to act this way. Those who should pass should pass and others who should try again have to do so*” (UO 1). However, there are other perspectives that imply disadvantages of the new exam management approach. For example:

It has created challenges of resource shortage on our normal operation. But we see the big picture or vision that we will meet as a country in producing capable, self-reliant students and citizens that will hold holistic responsibilities of the upcoming generation. Hence, by thinking the long-term positive outcome of the new exam management system, the challenges that we have faced is negligible and it is tolerable (UO 5).

In post-exam period, while some supervisors reportedly observed that the next grade 12 students started taking their class seriously, others supervisors witness fear and frustration among most students. Analytically, the former works for few clever and medium students and the latter for the weak majority.

DISCUSSION

In Ethiopia, there is a strong and consensual need for change of ESSLCE management approach but the university-based approach may not be the most desired and workable approach. Given the complexity of the university-based examination implementation process, the multifaceted unbearable challenges it entails, and its largely questionable efficiency and feasibility, it may not be taken as a sustainable ESSLCE management approach. The MoE also repeatedly declared that it goes for tab-based digital approach as its ultimate goal of the national exam management. Until then, universities will continue to be used as exam centers and the approach is only experimental and transitory. So far, using universities as exam centers has been practiced twice in 2022 and 2023; yet no significant measures are taken towards the implementation of the said digital approach. The questions are, therefore, “For how long will the university-based national examination management approach be continued?” and “What can we learn from the experiences of other countries in establishing a more functional, context-fit, and dependable national examination management approach for the respective countries?” The findings of this study revealed that even if the past school-based approach is seriously beaten by most stakeholders and a new approach is eagerly sought, a possibility of rolling back to it with modifications cannot be ruled out so long as fixing the best exam management approach is ahead of us (Nigussie et al., 2023).

Studies identified that exam management approach, like any other educational programs, is subject to change (Davey et al., 2007; Yongbo, 2020). This reform in exam management approach of shifting from school-based to university-based happened after the former’s strong establishment, for decades, in Ethiopia. The new practice of moving students to host university campuses where they take a national exam is novel to Ethiopia, and could be considered as a radical shift since the exam cheating induced social crisis has reached at its peak. The past defects in exam security thus made such a radical shift a necessity as viewed by the study participants.

Omebe’s (2014) finding showed that examination cheating may involve an organized system of supervisors, invigilators, teachers and heads of schools. Badasa, Nuri and Gizaw (2019) also identified parental pressure as a predisposing factor for cheating in national examinations. The findings are strongly confirmed in this study with a longer list of role players including political and sector leaders at different administrative levels, security forces, and some community members that implies the normalization of academic malpractice. They are reported as having direct or indirect involvements in the exam stealing and cheating. The involvement of diverse actors in the examination malpractices led to normalization of the practices as the study participants clearly and strongly stated. If that is the case, who is genuinely against the exam stealing and cheating, and why now?

The question is important because the same leaders and bureaucrats who were part of the problem in the past are in charge of leading the reform; hence, their level of genuine commitment matters

significantly. However, some important remarks to note here include that exam cheating is not a new or even a very recent phenomenon in Ethiopia as it is elsewhere in other countries, and that different attempts had been made to control it. However, searching for more effective examination management approach is imperative with changing patterns of exam stealing and cheating. This is well articulated by Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) who noted that control of examination malpractices is a never-ending battle. It is also important to note that not all members of each social category reported as actively and willingly involve in the exam malpractices.

With regard to the reason for the reform, the examination was a top national agenda or issue that attracted the attention of the government, the public and several stakeholders. We also found that the exam was a security concern. It had also become an administrative matter as it was difficult to evaluate and give performance-based recognition among regions, zones, districts and schools because of the frequent exam stealing and cheating induced distortions. As a result, the program attracted much attention of diverse stakeholders- i.e., the government, the community, the private sectors and the media -collectively: Some indicators for this claim include wide media coverage, frequent press releases by the MoE, and key figures' engagement, including the Prime Minister. Some study participants equate the national exam to development and even as a matter of survival as a country.

Like in Ethiopia, where the majority of students actively engage in examination cheating (Wondifraw, 2021), such malpractice has become one of the most obvious and depressing crises of the education sector of many African countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. In Ghana, studies showed that the trend of exam cheating has been increasing (Ashiagbor, 2019) that matches with the Ethiopia's scenario. In Kenya, unqualified candidates infiltrated to universities which are seen as catastrophic for the development of the country (Bifwoli, 2020; Shauri, 2014), which is a view frequently mentioned by our study participants from universities. The Nigerian education system is also encountering examination malpractices (Agwu et al., 2022; Omebe 2014). Kenya established punitive rules aimed at punishing and deterring cheating from happening (KNEC, 2012). Yet, a precaution should be taken not to reduce the complex problems of education system to only exam malpractice, and consequently, not to seek a solution to this single problem.

Having homogeneous characteristics of parental background and social ties (Claudio & Tonello, 2017) is considered as powerful contributing factors among the study participants; and the Ethiopian MoE largely relies on this thesis to justify the new exam management approach when it describes ethnic affiliation among invigilators and students as a factor for exam malpractice. The new exam management approach, at least to some degree, fulfills Keeves' (1994) suggestion of external examinations, administered under standardized conditions and by paid invigilators who are not the teachers of the students. However, the new examination management approach of Ethiopia tends to overlook Agwu et al.'s (2022) position of working on the students and their immediate environments. The authors suggest addressing exam cheating by focusing on proximate drivers: actors like school owners, students, teachers, principals, faith-based groups, community-based groups, and parents appear to be feasible within the short and mid-terms, unlike the remote drivers such as examination bodies, media, and government institutions. On the contrary, the new exam management of Ethiopia is built on mistrust against these actors and opted for distancing students from them which may result in limited cooperation of the same actors in the reform processes.

The new exam management approach of Ethiopia duly recognized schools and invigilators as drivers of exam cheating the same way that Onyedinefu (2019) argues about. Research evidence also elaborates that cheating during examinations is triggered by peer influence (Diego, 2017) which seems to have been overlooked in the new exam management approach of Ethiopia given students from the same school take the exam in the same exam room. Moving the students far away from home and school setting and assigning invigilators and supervisors away from the regions where they were born was to keep the students away from ethnically homogenous agents of exam administration. However, close examination of the seemingly ethnic-based favor in exam stealing and cheating seems to be more of apolitical game than genuine social commitment given similar contentions exist among districts and even schools of the same ethnic groups. A phrase "cadre-sponsored or leader-sponsored cheating" stated by a study participant typically implies this. That is, negative competitions over the students' score do not necessarily emanate from ethnic differences, but also from belongingness to different zones, districts and schools within the same ethnic-based state.

Moreover, the intention of distancing students from exam actors of the same ethnic affiliation cannot fully materialized because of different reasons. First, there is a logical error in the assignment of invigilators which was based on their place of birth rather than their ethnic backgrounds. Second, there are practical difficulties of avoiding the chance of assigning invigilators with the same ethnic affiliation as students, given replacing the missing invigilators from other universities with the hosting university staff is possible as indicated in the Examination Management Guideline 01/2015 (EAES, 2023). Evidences revealed that this practice has become more common in the second round of the ESSLCE management as invigilators were increasingly either absent from examination sessions they were assigned to or went back home because of discomfort related to accommodations and logistics.

This study found that technological advancement is both a contributor to exam stealing and cheating, and a promising solution to tackle the problems. Mobile technology and social media, for example, served the purpose of aggravating the exam malpractices whereas tab-based or online (digital) examination platforms are among the anticipated possible solutions to control the malpractices. Regarding technology use as a remedy, Ashiagbor (2019) recommends the prospects of using ICT to effectively curb examination malpractice in Ghana.

The notion of framing exam cheating as corruption, immoral act and a fundamental issue for academic integrity (Khodaiea et al., 2011; Solomon, 2017) boldly manifest in the findings of this study. Using exam as political tool by political actors, low performing students joining universities at the cost of high performing ones and involvement of teachers and school principals in such malpractices match those undesired features, respectively.

Arguments of the proponents of the new exam management approach are relative to the previous exam processes and results. Many study participants tend to justify the relevance of the new exam management merely by criticizing gaps and problems of the previous exam approaches. They used narrations about the past for both justifying the need for change and the relevance of the university-based experiences examination management approach. Although the past matters, the new exam management should be evaluated against its objectives plus present standards and implementation results in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and feasibility.

The country shouldered huge burden in running the program. The MoE reported that the exam management demanded engagement of several stakeholders and mobilization of immense logistics. Discouraging examination stealing and cheating is the main established justification by all our study participants to shift the exam centers to universities. Therefore, is there any alternative mechanism or intervention to discourage students from exam cheating and secure the support of other stakeholders to fight against the malpractice based on these inputs? Would it not be possible to control exam cheating if students take the exam at local schools if such understanding and consensus about the danger of exam cheating could be ensured among the key stakeholders? There is no empirical evidence for this not to work although many participants perceive it as unlikely merely based on problems in the past. Therefore, this could be among the would-be-experimented alternatives in the future.

A better understanding of development processes and analysis need to focus on the society (and stakeholders) as a system of inertia and change (Nordtveit, 2007). Plessis (2012) recommends that researchers should explain education as a whole system perspective and education reforms and Snyder (2013) emphasizes the importance of considering contexts of the different elements of the system, nonlinear nature of the causes, effects of educational reform and involvement of multiple stakeholders. Morrison (2006) also suggests a movement towards bottom-up development and change and other scholars reminded that democratic policy-making tends to be very complex, multi-variant, and time-consuming process in nature (Hyu-Yong, 2018; David, 1998). Effective and standard exam management (Zhang et al., 2014) is also influenced by the degree of commitment to a given program, and reform programs are justified on the basis of the outcomes they yield (Levin, 2001). Educational reform is a political work that can only be understood appropriately in a historical and sociocultural perspective (Levin, 2001). Understanding the examination management comprehensively and avoiding oversimplification are advantageous (Rescher, 2014), and as Firestone (2019) emphasizes, oversimplification undermines knowledge, which involves the omission of relevant details.

In view of the above literature and observation of the exam management approach, crisis in the education sector of the country is very complex, systemic and multifaceted in terms of its causes,

processes and consequences. Exam stealing and cheating are elements of that broader context. Therefore, changing exam management approach is part and parcel of educational reform within challenging and changing socioeconomic and political environments which implies the need of complex interventional approach. However, a critical look into the rationale and relevance of the exam management approach in view of complexity theory revealed that realities about the nature, contributing factors, solutions for the problems and results of the interventions are oversimplified in a sense that changing exam management alone does not ensure the desired changes. Exam cheating and stealing are not the only critical challenges for the education sector and even the factors contributing to the examination malpractices are much more complex than those identified by the MoE and EAES. Standards of schools, teachers' quality and living conditions, parents' engagement, and leadership commitment all need attention. The implementation processes, resources it demands and its effects are also not simple and straightforward.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, "Even if grade 12th exam result is shocking, we must pass through this to create better generation in the future" said the minister (MoE on Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, January 27, 2023). One can fairly question this for how long we should experience the shocking. Addressing the challenges of the grade 12 national examination management alone is just the miniature part of the solution for the big picture of the problem. The concern of looking for a new national examination management approach was shared among stakeholders, but there is no strong consensus that the university-based approach is the best alternative to depend on in the years to come. Thus, finding an acceptable and effective new exam management approach is an unfinished project waiting for continuous concerted efforts of the MoE, EAES and the other key stakeholders. The past and future oriented arguments for the relevance and rationale of the examination management approach gravitate to be simplistic, less empirical and less qualified in the lens of the complexity theory. That is, blaming the past wrong deeds and hoping a better future does not change the game unless well-planned comprehensive measures are taken by all stakeholders. The implication is that the stakeholders have genuine concerns related to the national exam management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The MoE and EAES should take precautions not to use oversimplified solutions for the complex educational reform. They should also appreciate participatory decision-making processes and build institutional collaborations. The national exam management ought to be given a fair and proportional attention, not an excessive one, which requires the collaboration of all stakeholders at all levels.

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