

**FULL LENGTH ARTICLE****Communication for Collaboration and Coordination among Actors of the University-based Grade 12 National Examination Management: Effectiveness and Challenges**

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**ABSTRACT**

The first university-based grade 12 national examination approach experimented in 2022 could have been effective if communication of actors engaged in the process was managed for better collaboration and coordination. This study, framed by Systems Theory, adopted the qualitative survey research methods and examined effectiveness and challenges of communication for collaboration and coordination among key stakeholders. Stakeholders participated in the administration of the 2022 university-based examination management were taken as population. Of these, 63 purposively selected top officials of universities and regional states/city administrations education bureaus, assessment experts, invigilators, supervisors and examinees were interviewed. In addition, evidences were collected from examination management guidelines, reports, and press releases. The data were transcribed, translated into English and thematically analyzed. The findings revealed that various communication tools were used: guideline was prepared and circulated, directives were communicated electronically and in hard copies, press statements and interviews were released, and mediated and face-to-face meetings were held. However, false information and rumors were circulating. Although efforts were made to curb them, addressees were not convinced. Despite the stakeholders' readiness for collaboration and commitment to the approach, ineffective communication hampered their engagement and coordination. The communications were not smooth, timely, consistent and clear. Moreover, the methods employed did not take into account the stakeholders' peculiarities, diverse backgrounds and interests. All of these influenced the new examination management negatively. Consequently, students and their parents were negatively affected. The implications of these phenomena are discussed and suggestions for future improvement of the approach are forwarded.

**Keywords:** Collaboration, Coordination, Communication methods and tools, Stakeholders, University-based national exam management

**INTRODUCTION**

The Ethiopian education system has been criticized for the prevalence of examination stealing and cheating in recent decades (Hailu, 2015; Lemma & Menna, 2022; Mengistu, 2019). For example, as Wondifraw's (2021) study indicated, the majority of secondary school students, with a prevalence rate of about 80%, are found to have been in active engagement in most academic cheating behaviors.

Unfortunately, this academic malpractice is not a problem associated with the students alone; it has also been orchestrated by many actors and factors: The absence of conducive examination rooms, social linkage, poor supervision, and parental pressure were among the predisposing factors for this educational menace (Berhanu, *et al.*, 2023). Many would agree that exam administrations at schools and universities are extremely infected with organized and/or individual-based stealing and cheating practices. This is evidenced not only by the students' engagement in mere copying from each other and working together either by the support of or threatening teachers and invigilators, but also by circulating exam questions and answer keys using communication platforms like short message services (SMS) and the Telegram, and the social media, mainly Facebook, and by stealing exam booklets both before and while the exams are administered. Apart from teachers and invigilators, a lot of other actors would play a significant role in these exam stealing and cheating activities. Therefore, depending on how it is used, the collaboration, coordination, and communication of stakeholders that play roles in the process, and the communication methods and tools they employ could have significant contributions to the exacerbation of the problem and to the facilitation of the solution.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) has been trying to manage this exam-administration-related and other quality of education compromising problems in a variety of ways. This is done in the hope that such a practice could significantly be reduced before a total failure of the education system of the country. For example, exam booklets are prepared in several codes so that students sitting side by side may find it difficult to copy from each other. Again, there was a plan of technology use (i.e., administering examinations online using tablets) for the same purpose. However, this has not succeeded so far.

One most significant measure being taken recently (since 2022) has been managing the Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESSLCE) in a very controlled or restricted environment, i.e., in the public universities of the country with invigilators from universities, and supervisors, and coordinators from regions which are different from regions of the examinees, with the assumption that the chance of collaboration for exam stealing and cheating could be minimized or eliminated. About two million grade 12 students took the ESSLCE using this approach in the past two successive years (in October 2022 and July 2023).

The two consecutive years of university-based ESSLCE management confined students in the host universities for about five days, preventing them from any kind of communication with the outside world. Among others, until they departed from the universities' compounds, students, invigilators and exam administrators were strictly prohibited from holding and using electronic communication tools like mobile phones, and from using associated communication platforms like SMS and social media. The reason for doing so was quite clear; from past experiences, communication in general, tools and platforms like mobile phones and social media were claimed to have been playing key roles in sharing answers among students in the exam halls and for disseminating the same across the country.

For this university-based examination management, many stakeholders that stretch from the federal to regional levels, i.e., the MoE, Ethiopian Assessment and Examination Service (EAES), universities, regional/city administration education bureaus, security forces from the federal and regional states, regional, zonal, and district administrations and education offices, transport service providers including the Ethiopian Airlines, examination coordinators, supervisors, invigilators and the students themselves participated (Berhanu *et al.*, 2023). For the smooth and effective management of the ESSLCE, all these key stakeholders need to collaborate and communicate effectively.

For organizations like the MoE and EAES that require the engagement of many stakeholders to accomplish their tasks, communication among the stakeholders is fundamental; it is a crucial element for the performance and decision-making of the collaborative effort within the work environment of the stakeholders, which is determined by the effectiveness of the communication process across all parties (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Communication is fundamentally used for transferring information across lines not only about immediate or day-to-day activities of the organization but also about issues beyond that, like the organization's overall mission, vision, policies, procedures, tasks and duties (Musheke & Phiri, 2021).

There is communication only if two or more participants actively engage in the process (Warmling & de Souza, 2018). To this end, messages need to be well crafted and communicated earlier before

decisions are made so that trust is built rather than eroded (Fernandez & Shaw 2020). However, messages should also be communicated while the task is being processed in a manner that could help bring about the desired effect, among others, using a variety of communication methods and tools to make sure that the message reaches the concerned. Otherwise, one could not expect any meaning-sharing fundamental for the task to get implemented, for as van Ruler (2018, p.379) argues, “communication is a process that is interactive by nature and participatory at all levels ... with an emphasis on the internal and external arenas of meaning presentation, negotiation, construction, and reconstruction”. Thus, what people hear or understand is largely based on their experience and background, and it is their active engagement in the process that could make the communication effective.

Communication could be effective, if, among others the proper methods and tools are used. For this to happen, the available resources will determine. To make use of them, it is necessary to make their distinctions clear. Samáková et al (2017) have given a list of communication methods and tools in a way that tells their distinctions. They categorized communication methods into three as synchronous – straight (which are meeting, personal interview, phone call, workshop, conference, and social activities), synchronous – virtual (which are e-conference, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, tele-videoconferencing, internet forum), and asynchronous (which includes newsletter, project documents, letter, board, website). The communication tools they listed are e-mail, telephone, presentation, video call, fax, paper, unified communication, chat, internal chat, social network and video recording.

To achieve communication, members in the communication process, or the stakeholders in the university-based exam administration, need to be given a forum for deliberation of issues. One of the challenges in this regard is the adoption of dialogue measures and practices that prioritize conversation and exchange of experiences; people need to be clear with what the plan is, and what they are expected to do at every stage in the administration of the task, the exam in this context, and for this to happen, they have to be given space to contribute their share in the system, and to ask for clarifications on issues they are not clear. In short, it is necessary to give importance to and share the knowledge of the people involved in the task (Warmling & de Souza, 2018).

If, on the other hand, communication is carried out poorly, particularly in contexts that involve a variety of stakeholders, who might have many competing concerns and predispositions, the entire program the communication is meant for could fail. Sometimes, people may join the task with some kind of preconceptions about what they are going to say or hear, and if what is being shared does not fit with their frameworks of reference, the communication process could in some way be affected that would have a spillover effect on the overall performance of the task being handled. If the situation worsens, the very cause for which the communication process was meant to contribute positively could fail due to conflicts, which, again, could have a significant impact on the success or otherwise of the task. Hence, as Warmling and de Souza (2018) also underscore, to repair such failures in the communication process, the form of interaction among team members should be improved since communication problems could cause distance among members involved in the process, and could generate negative feelings that interfere with the relationship between the members. The effectiveness of stakeholders’ communication management, therefore, determines the overall project outcome (Naqvi, et al., 2011) as the survival and smooth functioning of any organization is determined by, among others, the effectiveness of the communication process.

The diverse stakeholders that engage in the administration of the exam need to be well informed of what is expected of them so that they discharge their responsibilities effectively. In addition to identifying who the stakeholders are, addressing their expectations and interests is key to the success of the task at hand – the smooth management of the exam in this context. This could partly be done by establishing “appropriate and timely communication that meets requirements of stakeholders,” which includes “providing the decision makers with the required data and receiving feedback to ensure alignment among project objectives and stakeholders’ expectations” (Alqaisi, 2018, p.11).

As Shakeri and Khalilzadeh (2020) also state, one of the main factors for projects to succeed is communication management and proper and timely distribution of information among all internal and external stakeholders. This is quite critical particularly when the number of stakeholders who are involved in the task increases since, with the rise of their number, communication will become more

complex; “with increasing number of stakeholders, the paths and channels of communication are further enhanced and, consequently, the complexity of communication is increased” (Shakeri & Khalilzadeh, 2020, p.3).

Collaboration is defined as “the process of toiling directly with other individuals in an attitude of teamwork that benefits the organization, individuals, and ... consumers. ... collaboration is the integral working of like-minded people toward a common goal.” (Chitty, 2001 cited in Boswell & Cannon, 2005).

In their article entitled Meaningful collaboration for responsible innovation, Jarmai & Vogel-Pöschl (2020) have explained success factors and challenges of stakeholders’ collaboration. Most of all, they emphasized on the importance of investing time and effort into designing and carrying out a collaboration process in order to make it meaningful to all parties involved. This includes both preparatory and follow-up work processes of the collaboration. Moreover, the process addresses development of physical or virtual spaces dedicated to stakeholder interaction. Both competent preparation and briefing of all participants, and professional process facilitation and comprehensible documentation are crucial. Most of all, for organizations to engage in meaningful stakeholder collaboration, they also have to make sure that stakeholders have enough time to develop trusting relationships.

A leader first identifies the responsibilities for the different individuals involved in the program, and then gets out of the way and let them do the jobs assigned (Schaefer, 2004 in Boswell & Cannon, 2005). Finally comes vision; for a collaborative project to succeed, everyone on the team needs to be actively captivated by the mission and/or goals of the group. A shared vision held by all partners is an essential early step in the partnering process. Of course, vision also comes from the leader who takes the initiative to excite all of the members in the team.

Jeffery (2009, p.12), in *Stakeholder Engagement: a Road Map to Meaningful Engagement*, describes some basic principles of stakeholder participation. These are:

1. Stakeholders should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives or essential environment for life;
2. Stakeholder participation includes the promise that the stakeholder’s contribution will influence the decision;
3. Stakeholder participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers;
4. Stakeholder participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision;
5. Stakeholder participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate;
6. Stakeholder participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way;
7. Stakeholder participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

In their article in which they conduct a meta-analytical study of the literature on collaborative governance with the goal of elaborating a contingency model of the same, Ansell & Gash (2007) underscores that collaborative governance brings public and private stakeholders together in collective forums with public agencies to engage in consensus-oriented decision making. They identify variables that influence whether or not this mode of governance will produce successful collaboration, and these variables include the prior history of conflict or cooperation, the incentives for stakeholders to participate, power and resources imbalances, leadership, and institutional design. Based on these variables, the authors have come up with a model of collaborative process/governance which depicts possibility of reaching at the expected outcome when the three key factors to collaborative engagement, i.e., face-to-face dialogue, trust building, and the development of commitment and shared understanding, are supported by a facilitative leadership and an enabling institutional design.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to examine effectiveness and challenges of communication for collaboration and coordination among key stakeholders involved in the first university-based exam management and their implications for the actual exam administration so that lessons could be drawn for better implementation in future. More specifically, it aimed at achieving the following two objectives. First, to explicate the nature of communication for collaboration and coordination among actors during the first university-based examination management. This was mainly to examine how

collaborative, participatory, transparent, clear, and timely the communication process was for the stakeholders involved in the administration of the exam. Secondly, it was to identify the methods and tools of communication used and their impact on the effectiveness of the stakeholders' engagement.

### **Theoretical Framework: Systems Theory**

For this particular study, Systems Theory is adopted as a theoretical framework. The theory was originally proposed by the biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy in the 1950s. He defined a system as complex and a product of smaller interacting elements, and recognized the need for any organization to interact with its external environment (Von Bertalanffy, 1973). According to him, real systems are open and hence interact with their external environment (Chikere & Nwoka, 2015). Therefore, organizations are perceived as an open-ended process of coordinating individuals whose actions stem from applying their unique interpretations to the particular situations confronting them. According to Systems Theory, analyzing an entity as part of a larger whole or system is beneficial in determining the proper course of action for the said entity. Bertalanffy argues that everything is interconnected, and therefore, we should study interconnectedness as a means of understanding the world. For him, systems thinking applies in all disciplines to find general principles valid to all systems (Mele, Pels & Polese, 2010).

In their investigation of the multidisciplinary challenges for managing communication within complex multi-stakeholder settings, Lievensa and Moons (2023) adopted a systemic approach to communication. They have indicated the use of Systems Theory formulated by communication scholars like Thompson (2009), Lang (2014), and Burukina (2021). Thompson (2009), for example, construed interdisciplinarity as a core to study communication processes, relationships and interactions within more complex and dynamically changing teams. When Systems Theory is applied in the context of organizations, therefore, it is used, among others, to better understand the interconnectedness of communication at the organizational level, whether that communication is among internal, external or both public or stakeholders; normally, organizations in the environment are interdependent to each other. This interdependence according to the Systems Theory could be to the extent that one could not function properly unless it is supported by the other; hence, the outcome of an organization's communication has consequences on its functioning and its overall performance (Musheke & Phiri, 2021).

The Systems Theory views communication as "a system binder, crucial for the survival and growth of organization" (Almaney, 1974, p.35). In other words, communication helps in defining and sustaining an organization. In this context, it is possible to construe Systems Theory as a communication theory. Systems Theory was deeply influential among the former communication scholars although these early researchers suffered from a lack of appropriate data and methodological tools (Foote, 2022).

Accordingly, we always communicate to those who are part of at least one system and we do that as someone who is part of at least one system. Once we realize our role in the system and how our decisions and actions affect the rest of the systems we are involved in, we can communicate more effectively. Therefore, using the Systems Theory in an organizational context could help identify where a communication problem lies, why it happens, and how the communicative defect could be fixed or corrected.

Concerning the ESSLCE management approach in particular, since the task necessitates the involvement of many stakeholders across the federal and regional structures, schools, the community and the private sectors, any decisions about the management of the exam need to be well communicated and endorsed by the stakeholders for its effective implementation. To this end, effective communication plays a crucial role; on the other hand, failure to do so on any part of the system would significantly hamper the overall success of the project and consume the investment of huge human, material and time resources. Moreover, the future of the millions of the student population could be affected. The theory hence helps us understand such connections and their implications.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

### Design

The qualitative-survey research design was adopted for the objectives addressed in this study. It is a design preferred when the study has the nature of phenomena with an interest of, among others, discovering the subjective experiences, opinions and motivations of participants and reasons for the observed patterns (Busetto, et al., 2020). Moreover, qualitative data is characterised for being flexible, open, and responsive to context (Rahman, 2016).

### Population and Sampling

The population targeted for this study consisted of all stakeholders involved in the first university-based examination management in 2022. The population includes: the examinees, invigilators, supervisors, coordinators, university officials, regional/city administration education CEOs, and assessment experts at the federal and regional levels. Of all these stakeholders, a purposively selected sample persons that could be construed as key players in the administration of the university-based examination were interviewed; these 63 interviewees were from top officials of the EAES, education bureaus of the 10 regional states/city administrations (one top official and one exam expert from each), and 10 universities (one top official and one university clinic professional from each) located in the capitals of these regional states/city administrations. Apart from these, invigilators, supervisors, coordinators, and examinees were included.

### Instruments of Data Collection

This study used data obtained from different sources, compiled through semi-structured in-depth interviews and documentations. So, interview guides and document analysis forms were the instruments of data collection. The data collection constituted administration of in-depth interviews with the key stakeholders and documentation of reports and press releases from the MoE and EAES. While the reports were collected from the universities and education bureaus where the data collections were made, the press releases were accessed from the official Facebook page of EBC.

### Methods of Data Analysis

All the in-depth interviews were conducted in Amharic, audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. The researchers listened to the audio data, read their transcriptions several times, and where necessary, edited them to ensure that the messages shared by the participants were communicated accordingly. The media releases were also transcribed, and along with the reports from the MoE and EAES, were translated into English. The data collection, transcription and translation were handled by experienced and trained professionals working in Jimma University including the authors.

The transcribed and translated data were 266 pages. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. As Dawadi (2020) explains, thematic analysis is a qualitative research method researchers use to systematically organise and analyse complex data sets when the need is to search for themes that can capture the narratives available in the dataset. Thematic analysis is considered most appropriate for a study that seeks to discover meaning using interpretations since it allows the researcher to associate an analysis of the frequency of a theme with one or the whole content (Alhojailan, 2012). In fact, it is adopted for this study as “it fits well with any qualitative study which attempts to explore complex research issues” (Dawadi, 2020, p.62).

The in-depth interview and document data were collected from the Educational Assessment and Examinations Service (EAES), universities, regional education bureaus, and the media (EBC in particular). Documents and media contents were coded as they were, indicating explicitly where they were taken from. Interviews from EAES were coded as EAES. Interviews from University Officials and University Clinic Health Professionals were coded as UO and UCHP, respectively. Interviews of Regional Education Bureau Officers and Regional Assessment and Examination Experts were coded as REBO and REAE, respectively. Numbers were then assigned to each code as 1, 2, 3, ... to distinguish interview of one participant from the others<sup>7</sup>.

While the qualitative research does not involve data numeration, it uses data that is expressed in words, the description of accounts, opinions and feelings of people that is collected through archival

documentation, interview or focus group discussions (FGDs). However, qualitative study does not describe a knowledge for generalizations; it tries to provide a detailed information about an individual, group or any entity so that knowledge/insight that is applicable in other contexts could be gained. As Denzin and Lincoln explain, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (2011, p. 3). Hence, through the collection and analysis of qualitative data that is enough for the purpose, it creates knowledge that is transferrable in similar contexts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researchers considered ethical issues seriously. The project proposal entitled “*An Appraisal of and Lessons from the New Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination Management Processes*” was ethically approved by the Ethical Review Board of the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences at Jimma University in October 2022, and an ethical clearance was obtained (Ref No. CEBS 36/2015 on 24/02/2015EC). A team of data collectors from Jimma University were trained before they collected the data. Informed consent and voluntary participation was secured from all the informants. Participation was anonymous, and care was taken to the maximum so that findings were entirely based on the analysis and consequent interpretation of the collected data.

## **RESULTS**

In this section, analysis on the effectiveness of communication among the stakeholders that were involved in the first university-based exam management is presented. In doing so, the nature of communication is presented first, i.e., how collaborative, participatory, transparent, clear, and timely the communication process was for the stakeholders involved. Secondly, the methods and tools of communication employed and their possible influences on the overall effectiveness of the stakeholders’ collaborative engagement is discussed. Finally, the implications of the communication practice to the actual exam administration is highlighted.

### **Collaboration and Communication of Stakeholders**

#### *The rationale for communication among stakeholders*

The first university-based exam management was a new experience for most of the stakeholders. It was part of the experimenting process so that the MoE and EAES could eventually be able to adopt the best and lasting approach; hence, it was necessary to communicate this clearly, i.e., to make the rationale for administering the exam in universities clear to the stakeholders. First, it was part of the bigger project of exploring possible alternatives of stealing and cheating-free examination management to eventually come up with the best one. For example, the need to make the exam be administered at an equal and fair level of treatment of all examinees had to be clear to all stakeholders and concerned bodies. Secondly, the involved actors were diverse and many; thus, consultations with these stakeholders on how they should contribute their share to the effective management of the examination needs to be well communicated. Moreover, the approach was claimed to have been a result of consensus among the key stakeholders, and that should also be well communicated. Below is an extract from a press release of the MoE that confirms this conclusion:

*As much as we can, we believe that the exam will be given equally and fairly to all students. This is our main motto. We tried to explore many possibilities, including the use of tablet technology as media of examination, but the expense becomes around half a billion dollar. ... The discussion was not only at the Ministry level, but the government also was involved directly in the matter. There were many dialogues and discussions at government level. This is our first attempt and we have made the necessary preparations; we have also reached consensus with regional bodies. ... Anyways, we have clarified the issues and started the process of letting students go to nearby universities to take the national examination (MoE Press release on the preparation of the new ESSLCE management).*

An expert of EAES also had to say the following: “*On our part, there was a sense of trying any alternative that curbs the problem of exam cheating and stealing*” (EAES 1).

Therefore, the first university-based exam management was already taken quite seriously at least by the key stakeholders in the higher governmental structures (federal and regional levels). Perhaps, the problems of exam stealing and cheating that were experienced repeatedly in the past several years' exam administrations, and the associated decline of trust in and of quality of education across all levels in the country had become a worrying concern to the government. Thus, this university-based exam management approach was assumed to have been an experiment that should give lessons for the present and future exam administrations. The consensus among the key players and what they wanted to communicate to all stakeholders was that it should not fail at all.

As some of the participants explained, the way this exam had to be handled was also associated with the image of the country. For this reason, every governmental offices and other institutions like the transport service providers were expected to play their crucial role to its success, even if some of them may not have any direct responsibility for the management of examinations or the implied quality of education. A regional education officer had to say the following: "*Since the issue had implications to the image of the nation, the exam administration was taken seriously. Everybody was on a standby position, including the mayor of the city*" (REBO 21).

Accordingly, there were deliberations taking place among regional and federal level stakeholders with regard to how the examination should have been administered in universities. By doing so, among others, they were trying to make sure that, apart from other concerns like the safety and security of the exam-taking students, there should not have been any significant practices of exam stealing and cheating.

By conducting the examination in universities, there is a strong conviction by the key players that exam stealing and cheating could significantly be reduced. The primary purpose of conducting the exams at universities for the MoE and EAES from the perspective of communication was, therefore, to make sure that the exam stealing/cheating network is dismantled. Although it was not stated in bold, it was implicitly construed that there was collaborative engagement in exam stealing and cheating by the many actors which were involved in this ill-practice over the past years. This malpractice was undertaken by students, school principals and invigilators who also were directly involved in taking and administering the examination. Hence, it could easily be controlled when the examinations were administered in the public universities since the exams' security could better be ensured, and since the invigilators coming from other regions were supposed to be fair in terms of invigilating the students responsibly.

Thus, to minimize the possibility that they would communicate for the ill-practice of exam cheating and stealing, not only were the exam-takers totally detached from their familiar places (schools and districts), but the exam-takers and the exam administrators were also composed from different regions and universities so that they may not have any commonality to share with each other. An expert from the EAES put the case as follows:

*For exam cheating and stealing, the students, teachers, supervisors, school principals, even security forces were involved collaboratively; so the problem of examination is a serious issue at present. But when we let the students travel to a distant places, with the new 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 the others. On our part, there was a sense of trying any alternative that curbs the problem of exam cheating and stealing* (EAES 1).

Therefore, one of the measures taken to prevent collaboration of the actors for exam stealing and cheating was changing the environment with which the actors were familiar to involve in the ill-practices in the conviction that their environment would support them. The change of the environment, the invigilators, and security forces was thus to break any form of collaboration among the different actors that was meant for exam stealing and cheating. Of course, in addition to that, the students were totally prohibited from "*using internet and social media*" (Student interviewee 1) during their week-long stay at the universities while they were taking the exams.

#### ***Collaborative engagement of the stakeholders***



The various stakeholders showed their commitment to engage in this task collaboratively. For the smooth administration of the exam, they made the required preparations, among others, organizing committees, taskforces and evaluating their level of preparations/readiness. In this regard, a regional education assessment expert had to say the following:

*There is a taskforce organized for this purpose from various sectors like the MoE, university, regional education bureau, staff from exam center, educational training directorate, educational program directorate, water and electric supply officers, health and finance officers, and police and security forces. It was done through collaboration (REAE 22).*

A university official also stated that, on their part, a taskforce established by the president of the university was in place, and commitment, coordinations, and collaborations were strong among the team members working for the purpose:

*Overall, there was a taskforce, and the coordination during the first round was, honestly speaking, excellent. The president had called us for a meeting two or three times and gave us directions. The vice presidents were always with us, particularly when the exam was about to start, and beginning from the time it started. And, we all had to be here always, and we didn't have anything else to do. Hence, I think, we didn't face many challenges since there was an impressive commitment, understanding, and collaboration from all sides although it was a new experience. So it was good coordination (UO 01).*

The involvement of regional stakeholders in this decision making process seems to have been strong. When students of a region were to be assigned to universities in other regions, for example, as one top level regional official indicated, the regional officials were able to search for and facilitate spaces in universities found in their own regions. This was, as the participant stated, a result of serious discussions and communications with the concerned officials. The regional/zonal officials were well cognizant of the feelings of parents and the students to take such a firm position. Hence, following the deliberate discussions/debates held among the concerned bodies for a better administration of the examination, changes were made:

*Some of our students were assigned to take the examination in Afar Region. However, since parents were not willing to send their children there, we, regional and zonal officials, discussed the issue seriously and solved it eventually. In this way, about 5000 students who had been assigned to Afar took the examination in the universities found in our region (REAE 23).*

Therefore, not only did the stakeholders reflect on their readiness to commit to the task before it was handled, their reflections/evaluations after the exam was handled also confirmed the same. This implies that there was shared understanding of the essence of the new exam administration. They had shown their commitment to collaboratively manage the examination making it free from cheating and stealing despite the challenges they faced. The collective words/nouns like *citizens, everybody (involved), (all) stakeholders, collaboration*, and verbs that show collective engagement like *organized, concerned, concerted effort, and commitment* all show their handling of the exam in collaboration:

*Every stakeholder stands against the exam cheating issue. Citizens are highly concerned to avoid the problem. There was collaboration among supervisors, invigilators and security officers. There was a highly concerted effort by everybody involved. I think there was high commitment from all involved in the exam management (Current invigilators 5).*

*We were conducting the exam by leaving our regular activities (REAE 22).*

*There was collaboration among supervisors and invigilators, and also the security officers. There was a highly concerted effort by everybody involved. I think there was high commitment from all involved in the exam management (Current invigilator 3).*

*All the stakeholders discharged their responsibilities in an organized way. When the students were travelling from home to the universities, all the stakeholders, from the police force to the mayor were involved in transporting them being stand by (REBO 21).*

### Communication challenges

While the stakeholders seemed to have been ready for a coordinated administration of the exam, the overall nature of the communication process that was necessary for the claimed coordination and collaboration was problematic. This is evidenced in several ways; firstly, there have been frequent communication breakdowns that have hampered the effective collaborative engagement of the stakeholders. Secondly, the interpersonal communication exercised did not take into consideration the various cultural, organizational, educational and edge/maturity related variables. Lastly, there were not adequate platforms for any collective discussions/dialogues to have been held among the different stakeholders. These issues are discussed below.

#### *Communication breakdown as a challenge*

In relation to problems associated with communication, what a regional education bureau head said shows the overall picture. He stated in bold that lack of effective communication was a big challenge that acted against the effective administration of the first university-based examination.

*Challenge number one is communication. That is number one challenge because different messages were transmitted from the Ministry of Education to us. The biggest challenge was communication (REBO 28).*

**Message inconsistency:** As the participants stated, there were inconsistencies with the messages being communicated from the MoE and EAES down to the stakeholders at universities, regions and schools. The flow of information was, among others, not only untimely, it also lacked clarity, transparency and adequacy. As they stated, preparations of the key players (MoE and EAES) for the university-based exam administration were not adequate compared to the nature of the task. It was a nation wide project involving about a million examinees and exam administrators, transporting them from their places of residence/work to public universities and back home, and accommodating them for about a week. This huge project should have therefore been well planned and communicated to all the concerned so that they could make the required preparations. For some of the stakeholders, however, even where and when the exams were to be administered was not clear since that was not communicated early and clearly. A student, for example, had to say the following, “Regarding the information provision on exam management, we have taken an orientation one day before, and we were not informed and to get prepared for [exam questions from lessons we covered in] grade 9 and 10 from our schools” (Student 2). Hence, not only the orientation was too late (only a day before the exam), it also is incomplete for the students did not know that lessons from grades 9 and 10 were part of the examination.

The following excerpts all confirm this claim, but from the exam administrators’ side:

*The first challenge we faced in the administration of the examination was that we were not informed early when the exam would exactly be administered; we were informed too late. We were getting ourselves ready to administer it in the high schools. After we were informed [that it was in universities], we faced challenges... (REBO 21).*

*There was the problem of not getting into action timely once MoE announced the scheme via the media; there was a gap in preparatory work. Adequate preparation should have been made in advance, but there were gaps (REAE 23).*

*In the meeting, lack of awareness was expressed among the participants, and there were doubts about the possibility of giving the exam in universities. This is a challenge on its own; awareness-raising should have been accomplished earlier (REAE 25).*

The participants were therefore in a position to believe that the gaps created in the communication process (being untimely, lack of clarity and transparency, for example) contributed to the drawbacks encountered in the overall exam administration. As the participants themselves confirmed, among the reasons for the problems experienced during the exam administration, was, therefore, ineffective communication. Below are what two regional education assessment experts had to say:

*There were obvious gaps; there were gaps in creating awareness among students through orienting them into the nature and process of the examination. For example, while there was*

*intention to create enough awareness, we observed that there were limitations among the different actors, including the [school] directors (REAE 23).*

*Awareness creation was necessary for teachers, directors and other personnel so that they do the right work (REAE 25).*

Due to the lack of adequate communication and so lack of clarity, some of the study participants put the entire university-based exam administration in question. They thought sharing adequate information was a necessity, first with the key players themselves, and then among all stakeholders before they engaged in its implementation. However, they regretted for, according to them, that did not happen at all. As could be seen below, while a regional education expert questioned if the approach was best practice based, both the regional assessment expert and official commented on the lack of awareness among all the stakeholders about the chosen approach and the benefits it would yield for the quality of education:

*Do other countries gather students and give exams to minimize cheating? I don't think. Therefore, it was necessary to get information on the practice of other countries on how they manage exams and minimize cheating. The society, parents, political leaders and education related workers need to increase their awareness about education and examination system (REAE 22).*

*Since this system is new, there may be stakeholders who didn't accept it full-heartedly. Therefore, it is necessary to work hard to have good understanding about the aim and purpose of this new system among the different education stakeholders, including family, associations, leaders, and other different bodies. Thus, awareness [creation] activities are what is expected to work on in this year (REBO 26).*

**Delayed communication:** The other problem in relation to communication is that it was done late, and so the stakeholders did not have enough time to internalize the message to reach at a comparatively uniform level of clarity to get themselves ready for the collaborative task. As a university clinic professional said, it was just a day before the students arrived at the university that he heard about their coming: *"I remember I heard the students were to come only a day before they entered. We should have been informed and got ourselves ready ... So we need to be communicated and know about the plan that students were coming,"* (UCHP 01). A university official also complained about the short time they had to make the necessary preparations: *"The challenge was time problem. The time at which they notified us and the time we [were] given for the preparation was not sufficient"* (UO 06).

The health professional further explained the lack of making proper and timely communication about the plan, i.e., information dissemination, discussion, orientation, meeting and dialogue, using several examples as follows:

*The leadership on top needs to give directions down the line to those at the bottom. This is not the case so far, and this is a big mistake. The concerned office needs to be informed ahead correctly. Does the cook working in the cafeteria have this information? She has to be informed. Why? So that she may not ask for a leave, or plan something personal. ... The Ministry of Education has the plan, so it needs to discuss the plan with the concerned and cascade it down. They may have some room of time for themselves, but they have to communicate soon afterwards. This will help us also to get ourselves ready. There should also be orientations to be given for all of us. The work team that has a direct responsibility of the task has to be communicated soon. So, we need to have meetings earlier. So, dialogue is necessary on the available resources, the budget issue, how it could be found and who is responsible should all be explored (UCHP 01).*

Some of the participants cited several cases about problems associated with the delayed communication process to the extent that they eventually led some of the stakeholders to face serious challenges and to complain. A regional assessment expert witnessed the case as, *"There was the problem of not getting into action timely once the MoE announced the scheme via the media; there was a gap in preparatory work. Adequate preparation should have been made in advance, but there were gaps"* (REAE 23).

One complaint regarding delayed and inconsistent communication was about preparations of accommodations for invigilators. First the universities were not informed and so did not get ready accommodations for invigilators. Eventually, they were told by the MoE/EAES that lodgings needed to be booked for invigilators; however, since the communication was made lately, they were not able to make it as expected. As a result, many invigilators were not able to find rooms on the first days of their arrival, and so were forced to pass the night in places that were not clean and safe, and/or shared a room for two or more.

*Our assumption was that the teachers would come and they would book the rooms for themselves since they are coming for examination. All of a sudden, they [MoE/EAES] called and told us that we had to book rooms for them. At that time, there was a big conference being held in the city. The place where these teachers could stay had been completely booked already. So, the teachers came to the university as soon as they reached here since they were told that the rooms would be booked for them. We were not informed at first. We were moving in the town during the night up to four and five o'clock. So, this brought another pressure even until the teachers got dissatisfied and started bad mouthing the university (UO 09).*

**Payment related communication:** The lack of proper communication was not just about the accommodations issue only. Payment related misunderstandings have also been quite common. University staff like guards, janitors, proctors, and the cook and other general service personnel who were assisting the project working day and night complained for they either were not paid properly/fairly for the service they rendered or for the delay of the same if they were paid. Who should be paid how much for the contribution they would make in the administration of the exam was not communicated clearly even if it was stated in the guideline that was sent to the universities. The confusion associated with communications made about payments was therefore among the reasons for the absence of uniformity in payments made among the universities; as a result, invigilators and the other supportive staff had to complain severely to the extent they perceived the new exam management negatively. A university official put the problem as follows, “*There were lots of misunderstandings and miscommunications in relation to payments. First, the guideline itself lacked clarity though it was eventually revised*” (UO 07).

A health professional lamented on the absence of early discussions and dialogues with health professionals mainly on the proper allocation of budget required for health-related services, and on the payments that should have been made for the professionals who served the students:

*Again, we need to involve in real discussions; we have to engage in serious dialogues on the budget that has to be allocated. It is necessary to identify the workforce that will discharge the responsibility. For example, I have seen the letter the Ministry of Education sent after reviewing everything; it put in place issues related with payments. I have seen everything in detail; however, it did not mention anything about the health professionals. I am serious. It mainly focused on invigilators and the areas where the exams were to be administered. It didn't focus on the service required. Health is not about meals. Health is an independent issue on its own (UCHP01).*

#### **Poor intercultural communication as a challenge**

Since most of the stakeholders that were involved in the first university-based exam management were of different backgrounds of age, profession, education, experience, culture, and geography, to mention a few, from those of the students' whom they examined, the ease and room for any smooth communication was rare. This mix of people of different age, culture, and contexts in fact entails an awareness of using the proper inter-cultural, generational, and organizational communication. However, this was not worked out earlier, and communication among the diverse stakeholders during the actual exam administration was not effective. The exam taking students and their invigilators were from different backgrounds. Most of the examinees were teenagers with very complex behavioural patterns compared with university level students who are a bit matured. On top of that, since some of the students who were not prepared to work independently on the exam in the hope that they would cheat or copy, they were desperate and perhaps were ready to engage in any undisciplined acts. On the other hand, most of the invigilators and university security forces were not familiar with and well informed

to handle properly the high school students in general and the misbehaving ones in particular. It does not seem that the university community were well aware of the behaviour of their examinees and ready enough to handle them accordingly. This is how a university official admitted the case:

*The main challenge that we faced was the behaviour of the students ... The students were not [behaving] as new students who came from high school for the first time. They were bold, and their acts were so different. They did not want to hear you. What some of them were doing at night was not something expected from them, totally. Because as some of them were not expecting good results, they were looking for mechanisms to raise conflicts and interrupt the exam. There were those who were conflicting with guards [and] at cafeterias (UO 09).*

As a result, instead of solving these problems of the teenagers through dialogue taking age, social, experience, and organizational culture-related factors into consideration, instances of addressing them through unproductive measures like physical punishments were common. If the exam administrators were high school directors and the invigilators were high school teachers, for example, they could have solved such problems peacefully using their knowledge and understandings of the students and their problems. However, even if there were exceptions since some of the university educators have high school teaching or directing experience, the new exam administrators and invigilators did not seem to have been familiar with such acts and or were not ready enough to entertain them accordingly.

The other concern relates with the composition of exam supervisors, coordinators, invigilators and security forces. While invigilators were mainly recruited from universities (to examine in universities located in other regions), the others – supervisors, coordinators – were mainly from education offices and high schools (from other regions than that of the students'). The latter were also of former experiences of exam administration. Security forces were from the federal government; regional security forces were not allowed to participate in the exam administration. Against expectations, however, the exam administrators assigned from various origins and experiences did not work in harmony among themselves and with the students being examined, due, among others, to the difference in status and background (university versus high school, civil versus military) they may have, and lack of effective communication skills and orientations to examine the students responsibly, of course not to mention handling the individual differences they may have. On the other hand, both the task they had to handle and the context they were in demanded effective communication very much.

A university official who was dissatisfied with the line of command and communications among the actors, for example, implied the problem as, “*You know that it is the federal police who was taking over on the management; so, it was difficult to work with soldiers*” (UO 09). It could be inferred from this remark that there was an unnecessary interference of security forces in the university's management of the examination. Obviously, the two have totally different cultures of organizational communication. However, they could have settled such issues through two-way communication before they immersed in the task.

A regional education bureau official on his part reflected on this problem of communication among security forces and students, and the measure taken by the education bureau, i.e., organizing a committee comprising several stakeholders, to settle the issue as follows: “*Misunderstandings between the police and the students were also sources of challenge. We set up a committee ... who worked with the university staff because we wanted to facilitate understandings between them*” (REBO 29). Moreover, a university official narrated his observation of conflicts among the coordinators and invigilators, which, to him, were the result of a faulty combination of the participants and the position they were given in the administration of the examination, leading to inevitable lack of smooth, well-fitted and successful communication. He has put the case as follows:

*The invigilators and the supervisors, including the coordinators, I think it is necessary to reconsider the combination. There was real problem. ... The structure is like hierarchical, and it should be no doubt. Whatever the coordinators say, the chiefs had to obey, and what the chiefs say, the supervisors had to obey. And, whatever the supervisors say, the invigilators had to obey. But they didn't listen to each other, never. There were problems. The chiefs were not ready to obey the coordinators. There were lots of reluctance to act as per the directions being given ... Perhaps because the invigilators were university*

*instructors, they may not be ready to comply with instructions from high school teachers. I think it is good to investigate that. I mention this issue for you because two persons were in conflict, one university instructor, with another, a high school teacher (UO 01).*

Overall, it seems that all the stakeholders who were involved in the exam administration came with their own organizational culture and did not have any room for compromising their traditions and practices for the smooth administration of the exam. Instead, they all were in a position of protecting their faces and positions; as a result, the spillover effect of this miscommunication and/or conflict could have impacted the students taking the examination negatively.

Moreover, the examinees were deprived of making any contacts with people whom they were familiar with (like their parents, education officers, school directors, teachers, regional security forces that share their cultures). As an interviewed student indicated, they were affected by the physical distance created between them and their families, just due to the university-based examination. He said, "The new exam management practice has affected us psychologically missing parents as it is our first time to leave home (Student 1). Hence when they were faced with some misunderstandings or conflicting issues, it was tough for the exam administrators (supervisors and invigilators) to settle these issues. However, that could have been quite simple for the students' parents, regional officers and school directors who share the social and cultural realities of the students. Another student stated the problem in a solution-oriented approach as follows, "The management should allow students to contact with their parents or guardians" (Student 3).

A case in point is the fact that a significant number of students in Amhara Region boycotted the exam due to misunderstandings associated with rumours about exam stealing; it was the discussion facilitated and led by regional officials, religious fathers, and the elderly that convinced some of the students to return and take the exams, as one regional examination and assessment expert stated:

*The exam coordinators from the regions were not allowed entry to the exam centres since the MoE had given the mandate of administering the examinations to universities. This is a setback in itself because to cool down and control students [in cases of strikes and chaos], it was better to use people whom they [the students] know as they become shy of misbehaving in front of someone they are familiar with. The absence of this created the problem [of students boycotting the examination in masses]. Later, it was by using religious fathers, the elderly and higher regional officials that we settled the problem through discussion. As a result of this, although a few remained victims, some of these students returned to the examination (REAE 23).*

As could be inferred, the social, cultural, regional and organizational differences among the parties involved seems to have affected negatively the smooth administration of the examination. It is observed that sometimes even minor issues that could have been addressed through effective communication became sources of misunderstandings. On the other hand, the stakeholders that were from different backgrounds and organizational cultures should have been given awareness on how they had to work in coordination. Thus, even if collaboration for exam cheating and stealing could have been dismantled as a result of such a combination, the decision had resulted in distancing from each other and from the students who should have been supported properly to the extent that smooth communication was broken down.

#### ***Lack of face to face discussion and dialogue platforms as a challenge***

For the newly introduced university-based exam administration to succeed, it was necessary to make adequate deliberations among the concerned stakeholders. By doing so, they all could be at a better position both to buy and implement it effectively. However, it was not the case; for the majority of problems and challenges the approach faced, most of the study participants blamed the total absence, or, if any, the much limited platforms for discussion and dialogue. It does not seem that most of the stakeholders were well aware of what it was and how it should have been handled. A participant blamed the absence of/limited platforms for deliberations as follows:

*But there was communication problem. If you take me as an example, I didn't participate fully in the discussions as a focal person regarding how the exam was to be administered. There were limitations in this regard. I take that as a big gap. I personally was told via the*

*phone that I should give this service. I did not participate in person on how I should work with others. Most of the communication was done by phone. I personally do not know the person who was managing the task ... we focused on the task, and we didn't meet in person on how we, the concerned, should have worked in collaboration. ... We should have called our staff and give the required orientation earlier, and this has created gaps on our task, a huge gap (UCHP 01).*

The extract above explains that there was not much communication among the stakeholders. The stakeholders needed to be clear with what they had to contribute; they needed to have discussion platforms so that they may use them to ask for clarity and to reflect whatever they may have had. This, however, did not happen. They merely engaged in the task without clarity, and it is possible to infer what the result would be.

Against all these evils, the participants believed that the university-based exam management approach, which resulted in minimizing exam cheating and stealing despite the many challenges it incurred, would continue being implemented until a solution is reached. However, they felt that its implementation should be based on a continuous discussion among all parties involved, including the larger population. It seems that discussion is suggested to be used in the future also, not just to make the new approach successful, but also to let the stakeholders and the public reflect on the challenges they faced and the cost they paid when implementing this new approach, and to come up with another best and lasting solution.

*The trend we are now in and the way we have taken to address the problem won't be taken as a lasting solution. Until that comes, until the public comes to that level of maturity, we need to have dialogues, based on both practical and theoretical foundations. Practically, we need to tell one another that we couldn't continue this way. It has now come clear the punishment has come. But the change should come in the thinking that exam cheating is unethical (REBO, 21).*

The fact that the students and exam administrators were prohibited from using/making any forms of communication has also been an issue among the stakeholders. Arguments on the part of the MoE and EAES are quite clear: since communication tools are key instruments for disseminating answers and negative rumours among the examinees and the wider population, it was necessary to prevent their use by examinees and exam administrators in the compounds of the universities where the exams were being run during the students' week-long stay.

In an interview he gave on education and the nation for Hermela TV (n.d.), Ethiopia's Education Minister, Prof. Berhanu Nega, emphasized two issues in relation to the role parents and the social media should have played for the success of the university-based exam management. He pleaded parents of the examinee students to advise their children not to involve in exam cheating and not to go to the exam centres (the universities) with mobile phones. Regarding the social media, he admitted the many advantages these media would offer to the community by letting them know what was going on about the national examination management; however, he emphasized that care was required when getting news and information from the social media since they were not controlled, as everybody was source of news and information for the social media, and that irresponsible individuals would also use them (Hermela TV, n.d.)

In fact, the internet of the country was almost down or significantly limited during the exam weeks. It seems that this was done to further limit the social media's dissemination of rumours and fake information. However, this solution challenged negatively both the exam administrators and the students who could have used the platforms for their various communication needs.

Regarding the prohibition of the exam administrators from holding/using any communication tools and platforms and the effect of the same, a university participant said, "*Only few people are allowed to have [hold/use] mobile phones [in campus when the exams are being administered]; for example, if I need someone ... I have to go there ... . Therefore, the condition we were working in was also very difficult*" (UO 09). The invigilators also were not able to conduct the examinations telling the time students had from time to time since they were prohibited from holding any electronic devices, including mobile phones and watches.

The students could have also communicated with their parents and friends elsewhere if they were allowed to use their mobile phones. It was a very tough time for the students. A university official explained the case as follows, “*Students were confined in the campus, [and there were] no phones, the time is difficult without phone. Nowadays, people are greatly accustomed to listening world news and update themselves*” (UO 08). They could have also used the media of their interest for a number of reasons; for example, they could have reflected on or shared about their experiences: the nature of the examinations they took and their stay in the new environment where they were confined. In fact, as another university official put it, the students were banned from making any communication with the world outside of the campus they were assigned: “*no communication outside, no communications with their parents*” (UO 08).

Overall, in this era of communication, prohibiting the students and the exam administrators from using their mobile phones and the social media had a lot of implications. Even if the reason for doing so was positive, which was to prevent the dissemination of stolen exam booklets, answers and the associated rumors about the exam administration, it did not seem to have been convincing for some of the stakeholders. It is obvious that the negative impact of preventing people from involving in any form of communication outweighs the benefits that could be gained as a result. Hence, this implies that a better way of managing communication for the exam administration needs to be sought.

### **Methods and Tools of Communication**

A variety of communication tools and methods were used to make the collaborative engagement of the stakeholders involved in the administration of the exam effective; i.e., achieving the goal of conducting examination which is free from stealing and cheating. First, mainly the MoE and EAES had prepared and circulated directives, released press statements, and organized mediated and face-to-face events. Next, regional bureaus and universities organized awareness creation forums and trainings as well as preparatory orientation sessions for actors at various levels. A regional exam expert said, “*There was a meeting of academic deans in the Universities’ Forum in our region, and I was also invited to participate*” (REAE 23). Among others, task-forces and ad hoc committees were established and several meetings were held to deliberate on how the examinations could be administered through the collaborative efforts of all concerned. Similar awareness creation forums were also organized through the government structures, “*After we created awareness beginning from the zonal level, we gave directions so that [similar] awareness creation could be done at school level*” (REAE 23).

There were similar awareness creation platforms organized for stake holders in universities where the exams were planned to be administered. A university official recalled that a directive was sent to them by the MoE/EAES; a training was offered by a delegate from the same, and that they applied the inputs from these opportunities in the administration of the exam:

*We were using the directives sent for the exam agency. As I remember, there was one delegated person who came to just make us aware of the guidance and regulations which should be implemented during this period; and he came and gave some short- term training and we were using that one* (UO 06).

Moreover, apart from the directives, the short-term trainings and awareness creation forums, other forms of media like the telephone, SMS, and social media were used to make sure that the examinations were conducted effectively. Telephone, SMS, telegram and email communications were particularly used in the last days before the exams started to communicate a number of pressing issues like the universities where invigilators were assigned, and revisions made on the possibility of using air transportation, and the necessity of booking lodgings for invigilators.

Even when the examinations were in progress, the social media were used by the stakeholders; but it was not just for the simple exchange or dissemination of information alone; they were also monitored to make sure that the exam administration was going on peacefully. A university official witnesses his experience as follows:

*I didn’t have enough sleep then. It was only when I check on the social media that there was not any problem that I cool down and go to bed. I was even expecting a lot would come eventually, even after the students finished their exams and evacuated from campus. I was so worried* (UO 01).



In fact, these communication tools and methods were so extremely used by the key players. It could be as a means of getting feedback from the public; as mentioned above by the university official, the social medias were consulted regularly because of fear of experiencing some kind of failure (exam stealing and/or cheating). It could also be due to the fact that the approach was so new that most of the stakeholders were eager to make sure that they were on the right track. As a result, the tools and methods of communication were sometimes construed negatively. A university clinic professional recalls the negative experience as “*We were, yes, working for 24 hours a day, 24 hours! I may not stay here the whole night, but my cellphone did not have any rest. There were calls every time*” (UCHP 01).

On the other hand, irresponsible use of the social media affected the smooth administration of the exam. There was flow of mere rumours and false information on the social media. The rumours vary: poor food quality and sanitation and the associated sickness or death of students elsewhere, conflict between students and invigilators/security forces, exam stealing and cheating, mob and the like. That disturbed almost all parties: exam administrators, examinees, and parents who sent their children to universities to take the examination. A university official recalls an incident as follows: “*Families did not want their children to stay here because students aired false information about food quality; there were some students who kept their phones with them, [and] there were students who took cellphones with them during the exam*” (UO 08).

Another university official also discussed how the rumour and misinformation that was being disseminated would worry the students’ parents who would call them for clarifications:

*To speak the truth, there was much confusion. There was misinformation like they were saying six students died by jumping from buildings because the food was not good for them. They said ‘we will go out,’ quitting the exam. ... There were many rumours. The families who were far from their children were asking us about many things, and the students here were getting worried so much. ... So, there was much misinformation. Families were getting worried too much* (UO 09).

A regional exam expert recalls a rumour that spread among students in one university that went on misinforming that an exam was stolen somewhere; the rumour regrettably caused a significant number of students to boycott taking the exam and leave the campus. He explained:

*During the civics examination, some students started boycotting it due to rumours that the exam had been stolen. This was the result of groundless rumours that were disseminated during the social science sessions of the examination. Consequently, there were tendencies of exam boycotting and chaos in some universities. Therefore, many students, about 19,000, reportedly discontinued the examination in our region. This was instigated by catalytic students who mobilized the mob, leaving the exam centers* (REAE 23).

To counter such misinformation and rumours, however, and to communicate about positive developments of the university-based exam administration, the MoE/EAES, the universities and the regional education bureaus on their part were frequently releasing information via the mainstream media and their social media platforms. A regional education bureau official explained what they were doing in this regard:

*Other challenges that we were confronted with were false social media messages which released false information which have the capacity to disturb parents and students. This case was managed by releasing on spot mainstream media briefing to prove that they were fake* (REBO 25).

Against the directions given to students that they should not have come to the universities with mobile phones or any other tools of communication, some of them were able to smuggle their mobile phones into the universities, and they used them to share answers. Reportedly, smuggled mobile phones by the students themselves or by few university guards were used to send exam questions and receive answers from outside. Students were caught while they were using them; according to an interview the MoE Minister gave for EBC, 59 cases were reported in 39 institutions (October 22, 2022 EBC, <https://www.facebook.com/EBCzena/videos/536985104919293>). The implication is that there could

be others who were not caught but perhaps used smuggled mobile phones or used other mechanisms for such exam malpractices.

In the management of the first university-based examination, many stakeholders were involved, and it seems that they were well mobilized for administrating the examination in a manner that is free from stealing and cheating. However, the communication platforms, methods and tools that the MoE and EAES employed had deficiencies. Among others, the nature of communication was not participatory, transparent and clear. This implies that the communication aspect of the exam management was not planned ahead, and hence, it was implemented inappropriately. This has thus affected the overall success of the newly introduced examination management approach.

## DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of communication among stakeholders that were involved in the first university-based ESSLCE management, and to derive their implications for the actual exam administration. Two specific objectives were raised: explicating the nature of communication employed among the actors; i.e., how collaborative, participatory, transparent, clear, and timely it was for the stakeholders involved in the administration of the exam; and identifying the methods and tools of communication used and their impacts on the effectiveness of the stakeholders' engagement. The summary of key findings are discussed here.

The success of a huge project like administrating the ESSLCE for about a million examinees all at once across the country demands coordinated and collaborative efforts of stakeholders who are of diverse backgrounds and interests. There were a number of stakeholders who are involved in the administration of the exam; the stakeholders originate from the federal level to the regional, zonal and district levels, and from institutions and individuals in the education sector to politicians, federal and local governments, security forces and transport providing firms. In fact, they all showed their readiness to contribute to the success of the project – administration of the exam being free from stealing and cheating.

For collaboration and coordination of all these to happen, however, effective communication was crucial. The findings of this study confirmed that the key players in the management of the exam were cognizant of this fact, the necessity of buying the stakeholders' concerted commitment through communication. Hence, the stakeholders that had to involve in the administration of the university-based ESSCE were identified. As Alqaisi (2018) confirmed, identifying stakeholders, and recognizing and managing their needs and expectations contributes to create a suitable environment and to be catalyst for success. However, it does not seem that the stakeholders' expectations and interests were well explored to the extent they could be addressed accordingly so that the positive impact could be sensed in terms of administrating the exam effectively.

On the other hand, guideline particularly meant for the university-based ESSLCE management was prepared and disseminated, and meetings, media releases, and other awareness-creation activities were underway, all to boost the readiness and engagement of the parties involved, and for their concerted efforts. However, these efforts were not communicated at the right time and effectively: delayed communications were common; there was a lack of clarity, and in some cases, inconsistencies were quite common – the data revealed that the same issue was being communicated differently from time to time. As Alqaisi (2018) puts it, the success of these efforts depends on the “establishment of appropriate and timely communication that meets the requirements of stakeholders.” Early communication could have helped to encourage the stakeholders to respond positively (Carvalho et al., 2020) to the demands of the first university-based ESSLCE exam management to the extent that every challenge encountered in the actual administration of the exam could have been anticipated earlier and addressed accordingly.

Moreover, these stakeholders were people and institutions of diverse backgrounds and interests: from politicians to government decision makers, from academia to transport service providers, from individual students, and parents to security forces. However, the communications employed were not directed to the peculiarities of each. Hence, understanding and commitments would vary. As Bourne (2016), in her article entitled *Targeted communication: the key to effective stakeholder engagement* explains, it is not possible to engage with, and influence, the diverse community that involves in a

project like the ESSLCE using the traditional approach of 'one size fits all' strategy; instead, it was necessary to employ effective communication strategies that "take into account the complexity of the people who work with, or benefit from, the outcomes of the project".

In some cases, as the findings confirmed, there were problems of transparency in communicating decisions made by the key stakeholders at the top level to the concerned down the ladder with regard to who has to do what, when and why. However, in this information era, stakeholders can access information in a variety of ways (although it could also be incomplete, distorted or fake) and share it immediately (again with the possibility of distortion). Therefore, a key aspect of "organizational communication should be – and is – transparency" (Baraibar-Diez & Odriozola, 2015, p.10). As Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) also state, transparency is composed of three specific dimensions: information disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. In fact, stakeholder engagement and transparency are strongly interrelated having reciprocal relationships: while stakeholder involvement is key to strengthening transparency, transparency is necessary for effective stakeholder involvement (Perko, et al., 2020). In the context of the first university-based ESSLCE management, however, such level of transparency did not reveal; hence, it could be construed that the stakeholders' involvement was not effective enough to make the exam administration successful. Overall, even if the stakeholders' readiness to the demands of the exam administration was quite encouraging, breakdowns in the communication process affected the actual implementation in many ways.

As Fernandez and Shaw (2020, p.39) explain, "leaders should communicate clearly and frequently to all stakeholders through a variety of communication channels." Thus, in addition to the proper timing and clarity of the messages and transparency of the process, using multiple methods and tools of communication in combination could increase uptake of the message being communicated both by key players and among stakeholders. This could better influence the stakeholders' behaviour or the required action. The analysis of the data showed the use of a variety of communication tools and methods. Guideline that was meant for the administration of the first university-based ESSLCE was prepared and circulated. Directives were communicated electronically and in hard copies. Several press statements in the form of briefings and interviews were released before, while and after the examinations were administered, and mediated and face-to-face meetings/events were organized for the various stakeholders and the larger public. The essence of using these and other tools and platforms of communication would better help the stakeholders to be clear with what was expected from them and/or how the examination should have been administered, since "communication media vary in their richness, when the information is important, more than one communication channel should be used" (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020, p.43). Hence it was necessary to use multiple formats and tools which could help make the messaging more coherent. In the process, however, there were false information and rumours being communicated. While efforts of curbing them made, they did not seem to have been sufficient to the extent of convincing the addressees. They lacked clarity, adequacy and timeliness. Confining the students in campuses preventing them from any form and means of communication while they were in stress as they were taking the exams did not seem to have been of any help. As a result, a significant number of students were disturbed by the rumours and fake information disseminated, to the extent that some of them evacuated from the exam centres/universities.

The ESSLCE management demanded the collaborative engagement of many stakeholders, from federal to local, and from the government to private sectors. It demanded the investment of huge human, material and time resources. These stakeholders need to be well coordinated to discharge their exam administrating role effectively. Hence, effective communication among these stakeholders was so crucial. As the task at hand was administrating ESSLCE, the result of which would determine the future fate of about a million students, any failure in the interconnected tasks of the stakeholders would significantly hamper the overall success of the project. The Systems Theory has helped us understand these connections and their implications.

## CONCLUSIONS

The new university-based ESSLCE management was introduced in public universities as an alternative to coming up with a better way of handling examination stealing and cheating. The approach brought

challenges despite the concerted efforts of the many stakeholders and actors across the federal, regional, and city administration levels. The stakeholders' efforts could result in the desired goal of achieving stealing-and-cheating-free exam management only when they engaged in the task collaboratively, and real collaboration is a result of effective communication.

Despite the active involvement of stakeholders, the lack of effective communication hampered the required coordinated and collaborative efforts. Even if guidelines meant for the first university-based ESSLCE management were prepared and disseminated, and meetings, media releases and other awareness creation activities were underway, these efforts were not conducted effectively: delayed and distorted communications were so common; there was a lack of clarity, and in some cases, inconsistencies were observed – the same issue was being communicated differently from time to time. Even if there were some attempts of orienting the students to get themselves ready academically and psychologically for new to cope up with the environment, that was not adequate enough to convince them. Moreover, the methods of communication employed and the communication tools used were not directed to the peculiarities of the stakeholders. In some cases, there were problems of transparency when communicating decisions made by the key stakeholders across the concerned bodies.

On the other hand, students were prevented from using any communication tool and platforms; hence, they could not contact their parents or loved ones and consult their preferred platforms on issues of interest while they were on campuses. This was done due to fear of dissemination of exam questions and answers and other false and disturbing rumors. However, that decision significantly affected the students' right to communication and expression.

The prevention of invigilators, examinees, and other supporting staff from using any ICT in the campuses where the examinations were administered might have helped the key stakeholders. Due to that measure, the spread of answers and exam administration-related rumors was significantly reduced. However, there was still false information and rumors disseminated among the examinees and the larger population. Efforts to curb them were made, but they did not seem to have been sufficient to convince the examinees and other stakeholders; as a result, a significant number of students were disturbed by the rumors and the fake information that was being disseminated. Some of the students who seemed to have lost hope in the process left the exam centers as a result. Hence, the communication breakdown affected the administration of the exam in significant ways. Overall, even if the stakeholders' readiness to meet the demands of the first university-based ESSLCE management was quite encouraging, the ineffectiveness of the communication process, coupled with many other challenges addressed in other articles of this research project, contributed to the problematic management of the examinations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are given:

- A national project like the university-based exam management needs thorough preparation and deliberation of all stakeholders; for the project to succeed, all the stakeholders need to understand and own it. Thus, it is necessary for MoE and EAES to plan for and communicate early so that transparency is insured, clarity is achieved, and amendments are made based on inputs generated;
- It is necessary to make sure that the already established collaborative engagement of stakeholders is cultivated by gathering adequate input so that similar projects in the future are effectively implemented. Hence, communication platforms for generating stakeholders' feedbacks need to be organized by MoE and EAES.
- The use of communication methods and tools need to be geared with the nature of the stakeholders, their background, interest and predispositions, and other behavioural and social factors ought to be well explored and considered by MoE and EAES in the selection and use of communication methods and tools.

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