FULL-LENGTH ARTICLE

First University-based Grade 12 National Examination Management in Ethiopia: Challenges Encountered

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the challenges encountered in the first university-based Grade 12 National Examination management in Ethiopia, a model where centralized organization was delegated to designated hosting universities. Recognizing the potential influence of challenges on such large-scale assessments, the study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to capture the lived experiences of diverse stakeholders involved in the process. Using purposive sampling, we conducted 62 in-depth interviews with stakeholders including the Educational Assessment and Examinations Service (EAES) experts, university officials, students, supervisors, and invigilators from diverse regions. Thematic analysis of interview data revealed major challenges related to student health and psychological adjustment (stress, homesickness, adaptation difficulties), student disciplinary issues (rumormongering, dormitory disturbances, property damage, and harassment), and budget constraints. These challenges were attributed to the universities' limited experience managing large-scale exams, insufficient preparedness at various levels, and hosting institutions' capacity constraints. Participants reported a higher frequency of negative incidents compared to previous years. To mitigate these challenges for future examinations, collaborative preparedness efforts involving all stakeholders from national ministries to secondary schools are recommended, alongside targeted interventions based on the specific needs of students and universities. By minimizing these challenges, Ethiopia can improve the national examination experience for students and optimize future examination management.

Keywords: Challenges, Ethiopia, examination management, national examination; psychological adjustment; stakeholders; preparedness

INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, the Grade 12 National Examinations serve as a critical gateway, determining access to higher education. However, recent years have been marred by rampant cheating and examination theft, casting a dark shadow over the entire assessment process. In response, the Ministry of Education (MoE) implemented a bold and unprecedented reform in 2022: shifting the examination setting from secondary schools to universities and entrusting university faculty with invigilation duties. This

significant shift, as outlined in the MoE's 2022 report, involved transporting grade 12 students from their familiar schools to university campuses. This unprecedented move aimed to break the cycle of malpractices rooted in the secondary school setting. As Nigussie et al. (2023) emphasize, understanding these challenges is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of this bold reform. This study delves into this uncharted territory, exploring the challenges encountered during the first year of university-based exam management in Ethiopia.

The stakes surrounding national examinations are monumental, captivating the attention of not just students, but also policymakers, researchers, and the public (Wang et al., 2023). This concern intensifies when new systems are implemented, like the 2022 Ethiopian experiment that shifted examination management to universities. Such shifts can ignite a web of pressures for students, emanating not only from the examination itself but also from parents, teachers, schools, media, and even policymakers (Chung & Chea, 2016). While stress can, under certain circumstances, foster positive outcomes and improvement, its unhealthy levels (the fear of failure) can cast a heavy shadow, leading to feelings of degradation, humiliation, stress, and shame (Keans, 2011). This pressure, sadly, can drive some students towards exam cheating.

The burden, however, does not rest solely on students' shoulders. As Klinger and Rogers (2011) argue, teachers and school leaders also bear the brunt of these examinations. Driven by an accountability mindset, they often feel their self-worth and effectiveness hinge on student outcomes, creating a culture of fear and pressure where "doing whatever it takes" to meet expectations becomes the norm (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). This trend finds stark expression in accusations of cheating leveled at certain countries in large-scale assessments like PISA (Sands, 2017).

Educational assessment, from classroom quizzes to national examinations, serves as a crucial partner in the learning journey. It guides in evaluating student achievement, diagnosing learning gaps, and making informed decisions about placement and selection (Brennan, 2006). Its role in providing evidence of educational quality is undeniable, as reflected in the vast body of research on assessment. However, the critical importance of examinations in individual and societal well-being can be undermined if the moral compass of stakeholders' wavers. As Tina (2009) asserts, declining ethical standards among actors like teachers, students, and school administrators can jeopardize the validity and reliability of these crucial assessments. Examinations, representing the culmination of a learning period, should be a reliable measure of student performance based on their acquired knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, the prevalence of examination malpractices like stealing and cheating in certain educational systems casts a shadow on their integrity (Cresswell et al., 2015).

For a decade, the specter of cheating has haunted Ethiopia's Grade 12 National Examinations, a critical gateway to higher education. This widespread malpractice, as acknowledged by the Ministry of Education itself (MoE, 2022), has cast a long shadow over the integrity of the entire education system. The gravity of the issue is further underscored by a growing body of research. Chala and Agago (2022) paint a stark picture, highlighting how examination malpractices like stealing and cheating have significantly tarnished the image of Ethiopian education. The consequences are far-reaching, impacting not just students and their futures, but also public trust and confidence in the system.

In 2016, an anonymous leak of the national examination on social media sparked widespread outrage and frustration among students, parents, and educators. Similarly, the 2019 leak and subsequent grade inflation in 2020 forced the cancellation of entire subject scores and the withholding of results from suspected schools and students, creating chaos and uncertainty for all involved (Chala & Agago, 2022). These incidents highlight the urgent need for reform. In response, the Ethiopian government implemented a bold new approach in 2022, shifting the Grade 12 National Examinations to university settings, hoping to break the cycle of cheating and restore the integrity of the system.

Unlike some other countries, such as Japan where universities conduct their own entrance tests, Ethiopia's singular national examination shoulders the immense weight of selection and accountability (Naoki & Koizumi, 2018). This centralized system, while ensuring standardized criteria, also concentrates pressure and potential challenges. While national examinations can offer valuable tools

for selection, accountability, and even regional comparisons (Naoki & Koizumi, 2018), their implementation is not without hurdles. Ensuring responsible invigilation, a conducive atmosphere, and fostering student responsibility and positivity are just some of the challenges that can undermine the fairness and effectiveness of these assessments (Cresswell et al., 2015). Furthermore, the consequences of relying heavily on exam scores can be far-reaching. When used appropriately, they can provide valuable insights into student performance. However, Kane (2013) warns against the dangers of inappropriate use or singular reliance on examination scores, as they can have unintended negative consequences.

Large-scale national examinations hold immense power to shape student futures. Yet, within their complex pathways lurk potential pitfalls and unforeseen challenges. Beyond the familiar woes of exam-related anxiety and sleep deprivation, students may battle negative attitudes, health issues, and even psychological distress under the intense pressure of these high-stakes assessments (Zhao, 2018). For examination administrators, financial constraints and unforeseen logistical hurdles can loom large, adding another layer of complexity to the process (Emler et al., 2019). As Emler et al. (2019) aptly describe, these hurdles come in three forms: high cost, high impact, and high stakes. The national examinations cast a wide net, impacting far more than just the students seated at their desks. Their reach extends to teachers, schools, families, and even the wider community, weaving a complex web of stakeholders with diverse experiences and anxieties (Emler et al., 2019).

At the heart of this web lie the students themselves, bearing the immense weight of the test's consequences. College admission examinations, for instance, hold the power to unlock or slam shut the door to their futures, making the stakes impossibly high (Riley & Cantú, 2000). This pressure cascades outward, impacting teachers who feel the weight of accountability and the potential repercussions on their careers and schools (Emler et al., 2019). Schools, in turn, become battlegrounds for preparation, with the focus often shifting from learning to test-taking strategies, creating a culture of stress and anxiety (Ho, 2012). But the ripples extend even further, reaching families who bear the emotional and financial burdens of supporting their children through high-stakes examinations. Parents grapple with anxieties about their children's success and the potential consequences of failure, adding another layer of pressure to an already fraught environment.

In countries like China and Korea, where these high-stakes examinations are a ubiquitous feature of the educational landscape, the consequences are starkly visible. Students endure physical and mental exhaustion under the relentless pressure to perform, raising concerns about the long-term impact on their well-being and development (Ho, 2012).

This research delves into the uncharted territory of university-based examination management in Ethiopia, a unique experiment with no existing research to draw upon. Recognizing the challenges of large-scale national examinations, like Ethiopia's Grade 12 National Examinations, is crucial, but solely focusing on them paints an incomplete picture. This study delves deeper, exploring not just the well-worn path of administrative hurdles, but the ripple effect of these examinations – how they touch and alter the lives of all stakeholders in Ethiopia's complex ecosystem. Therefore, instead of focusing solely on the well-documented challenges of managing such high-stakes examinations, a more valuable approach is to examine the encounter with on all stakeholders. How does this examination system affect students, parents, institutions, and the government? Understanding these challenges can provide a stronger foundation for future iterations and potential improvements in the Ethiopian examination system.
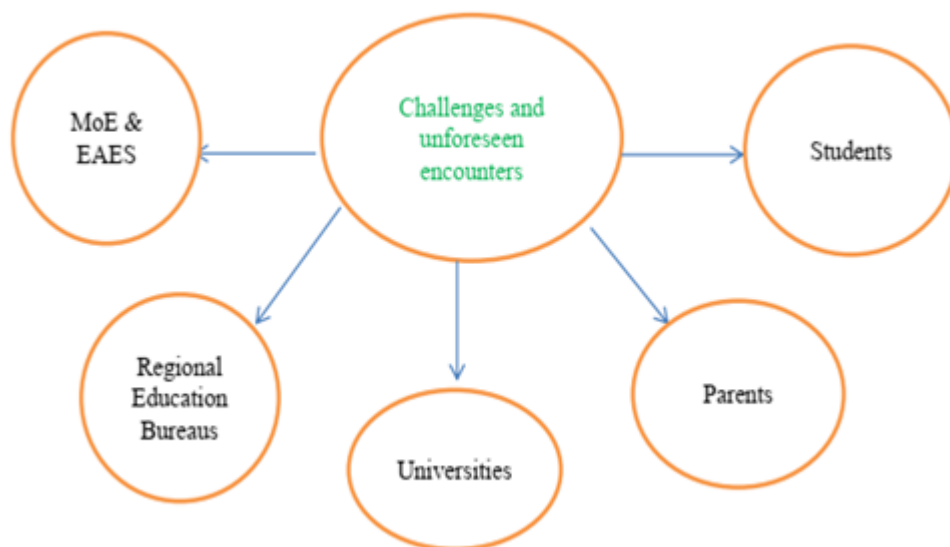
Figure 1: Conceptual framework showing the stakeholders who faced the challenges

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design
This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to deeply explore the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in the first university-based Grade 12 National Examination in Ethiopia. This design was chosen for its relevance to capture the subjective meanings and interpretations of participants as they navigated the challenges and complexities of this new examination setting.

Instruments
Semi-structured interview guides, developed specifically for each stakeholder group, were used to collect rich qualitative data. These guides covered key aspects of the examination process, including participants' experiences with the new procedures, perceived challenges encountered, and potential suggestions for improvement.

Population and Sampling
The target population for this study included all individuals directly involved in the first university-based national examination management process. This encompassed: personnel from the Educational Assessment and Examination Services (EAES), Regional and city administrations' education bureaus, students who took the examination, officials from all generation universities across the nation (excluding Tigray region), parents, university clinic health professionals, invigilators, and supervisors recruited from high schools. Purposive sampling, informed by the principle of maximum variation (Cresswell and Clark, 2011)), was employed to select participants from each group. This technique ensured that the sample represented diverse perspectives and experiences across stakeholder categories, age groups, and geographical locations. A total of 62 participants were interviewed, encompassing a range of individuals from each stakeholder group.

Data Collection
This study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather rich qualitative data from a total of 62 participants. These participants represented diverse stakeholder groups directly involved in the first university-based Grade 12 National Examination management process: 16 students, 2 Educational

Assessment and Examination Services (EAES) experts, 8 top university officials: including vice presidents, student deans, and examination coordinators from various universities, 5 University clinic health professionals: offering insights into student stress and well-being during the exams, 5 Regional education office personnel: representing different regions and providing perspectives on implementation challenges, 6 parents, 10 examination invigilators: sharing their firsthand experiences with examination security and student behavior, and 10 supervisors: offering perspectives on managing students and maintaining order at examination centers.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to probe specific aspects of the new examination management system and explore participants' individual experiences and perspectives. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes, with the variation reflecting the diversity of roles and the amount of detail each participant had to offer. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in either Amharic or Afan Oromo to ensure maximum comfort and understanding for participants. Trained data collectors, fluent in the respective languages, conducted the interviews and ensured informed consent and confidentiality throughout the process. All interviews were digitally recorded for accurate transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis:
This study employed thematic analysis, a qualitative research method, to analyze the in-depth interview data. First, the transcribed data were coded and categorized according to emerging themes. The initial analysis focused on identifying dominant themes within each stakeholder group. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of how different stakeholders experienced and perceived the challenges. Subsequently, cross-cutting themes across stakeholder groups were also explored to identify broader patterns and insights. Through this iterative process, several key themes emerged, revealing the major challenges faced by different stakeholder groups. Notably, the analysis revealed a strong link between the type of stakeholder and the nature of the challenges encountered. This means that individuals within similar stakeholder groups (e.g., students, university officials, invigilators) tended to experience similar types of challenges. To showcase the richness and diversity of perspectives among participants, the data analysis and presentation were structured around these stakeholder groups. This allows the reader to delve deeper into the specific experiences and challenges faced by each group, highlighting both shared concerns and unique perspectives.

Ethical considerations
Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at Jimma University, CEBS 36/2015 in October 2022. Support letters secured from Vice-president for Research and Community Services at Jimma University were also submitted to relevant stakeholders and data sources. More importantly, volunteerism of participation, anonymity of participants and confidentiality of the collected data and genuine reporting of the findings were strictly maintained.

RESULTS
The analysis revealed significant differences in the challenges faced by different stakeholders involved in the first university-based Grade 12 National Examination. Therefore, the study results are presented sequentially, focusing on the specific challenges encountered by students, parents, universities, regional education bureaus, and the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Educational Assessment and Examination Services (EAES). This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and concerns across stakeholder groups.

Challenges related to students
The study revealed that students encountered significant challenges during the first university-based examination management, which negatively influences their attitudes towards the new approach. Several factors contributed to this negativity, including anxiety and stress. A substantial number of students reported feeling anxious and stressed, primarily due to the change in examination environment. Moving from their familiar school setting to unfamiliar university environments significantly altered their routine and comfort levels (Student 01). This was particularly pronounced for students from rural areas who had to travel long distances, further adding to their stress regarding transportation, food, and accommodation. The travel itself, particularly for long distances, posed

additional challenges. Students struggled to adjust to the new environment and establish the necessary routines for optimal performance. This had influenced their concentration and overall examination readiness. Besides, the implementation of stricter examination management procedures to curb cheating and disciplinary issues, while understandable, was perceived negatively by some students. They felt that the rigid controls created an overly stressful atmosphere, impacting their focus and performance (Student 02). These findings highlight the importance of considering students' well-being and adaptability when implementing significant changes in examination settings.

The dormitory accommodations provided for students during the university-based examinations presented another set of challenges. While some students appreciated the convenience of on-campus housing, others found dormitory life disruptive and detrimental to their examination preparation. The primary issue, as highlighted by Student 02, was the lack of quality sleep due to late-night noise and disturbances from roommates. This sleep deprivation significantly impacted their ability to revise effectively for the next day's exams.

Beyond sleep and study issues, students raised concerns about food service, movement restrictions and health challenges. The quality and taste of the food served in university cafeterias fell short of expectations, further adding to student stress and dissatisfaction (Student 04). The increased security measures within university compounds, with multiple checkpoints and limitations on free movement, further contributed to student anxiety and feelings of being confined (Student 05). These combined factors, along with the unfamiliar environment, led to a significant number of students experiencing stress, anxiety, and even depression (Student 05). Some students even fainted or sought medical attention at university clinics and local hospitals (Student 06).

The challenges faced by students resonated with parents, who expressed concerns about the new system and its impact on their children's well-being. An interview with an EAES expert (EAES 01) revealed that "student adjustment was a major concern, with parents expressing reluctance to send their children to unfamiliar environments for the exams." This highlights the potential need for further consideration of student well-being and the impact of environmental changes on their performance.

The new examination management system presented significant challenges for student health, placing immense strain on healthcare resources, and exposing students to a variety of health concerns. As one university clinic health professional (UCHP, 02) stated, "It was difficult to treat this much... 1600 students on a given day. The area itself looked like a market. It seems that there was no medical service. They seemed to be queuing up for food in the cafeteria." This quote highlights the overwhelming demand placed on healthcare services, raising concerns about the adequacy of resources to handle the influx of students requiring medical attention. University officials also confirmed the widespread occurrence of health problems among students. One official (UO, 09) mentioned witnessing over 550 students reporting illness on a single day. This broad statement further emphasizes the need to understand the specific types of health issues affecting students.

One major contributor to student health problems was the unfamiliar food served at the universities. The disparity between students' accustomed diet and the available options led to inadequate food intake and frequent cases of gastritis, as noted by a health professional (UCHP, 02). This challenge impacted students particularly because the new environment and food were unfamiliar and outside their comfort zone. The analysis also reveals socioeconomic disparities in student experiences. A regional education official from Addis Ababa observed that nearly half of the students, primarily from private schools with higher living standards, struggled to adapt to the new environment and food (REAE, 21). This suggests that the transition was more challenging for students accustomed to greater comfort and familiar environments.

The new examination system also impacted students' psychological well-being. Separation from families and familiar environments, especially for the first time, contributed to stress and anxiety. Interviews revealed numerous instances of fainting, crying, and panic attacks, particularly among female students (REAE, 22; UO, 06). University clinic officials confirmed this trend, reporting stress, anxiety, and sleep deprivation as the leading reasons for student visits (UCHP, 03; EBC, October 22,

2022). Furthermore, an official described witnessing "hysteria-like problems" and psychosomatic issues (UO, 04) saying:

> When you take them to hospital, they would try to jump off the vehicles, to run away. We had to control them like the federal police forces do. We would wait for them until they finished their treatments, and when the physicians told us they were okay, we would return them to the university so that they might finish their examinations (UO, 01).

These observations highlight the need for better support systems and stress management strategies during future exam implementations.

Students with chronic illnesses faced additional challenges. Some reported threats of suicide and hospitalization requests if denied access to their regular medication (UO, 01). University officials confirmed instances of confiscated medication due to security protocol miscommunication, causing distress and potential health risks (UO, 01). This incident underscores the importance of clear communication and coordination between examination stakeholders and ensuring that access to essential medication is prioritized. By prioritizing student well-being and addressing psychological and health concerns effectively, future implementations of the examination system can create a more positive and successful experience for all participants.

While most students navigated the new examination system effectively, a small minority engaged in disruptive behavior. One university official observed students deliberately spreading rumors and causing psychological distress among others (UO, 09).

> For example, one day, there was disturbance based on rumor that indicated that one of the students was shocked by electricity around the girls' dormitory. Because of the rumor, there might have been students who [the next day] sat for the examination without sleeping adequately and hence their results could have been affected negatively (UO, 09).

Such incidents, like the rumor about a student is being electrocuted, could have negatively impacted the sleep and performance of unsuspecting students (UO, 09). Groundless rumors circulating during the exam, particularly regarding leaked questions, led to a significant incident of student boycotting (REAE, 23). Nearly 19,000 students reportedly discontinued the civics exam due to this misinformation (REAE, 23). This highlights the critical importance of effective rumor control mechanisms and clear communication during the exam period.

Some students disregarded examination regulations, including bringing prohibited items like cellphones into examination halls (UO, 08). This raises concerns about potential cheating and a lack of respect for the examination process. Addressing these issues requires stricter enforcement of rules combined with educational efforts to emphasize the importance of academic integrity.

Beyond rule-breaking, some students engaged in activities that disrupted the study environment and potentially hindered the preparation of others. This ranged from general idleness to behaviors deemed inappropriate by university officials (UO, 09). Such conduct created an unfair disadvantage for students seeking a focused environment to study and prepare for examinations. Addressing this issue requires raising awareness about respecting others' study space and promoting responsible conduct within university campuses. By addressing student conduct issues proactively and promoting a culture of respect and responsibility, future iterations of the examination system can create a more positive and productive environment for all participants.

Several concerning instances of student misconduct emerged during the examinations. Some students engaged in physically aggressive behavior, attempting to attack invigilators or inciting conflict (Invigilators, 01). University officials attributed this behavior to a lack of preparedness and a desire to disrupt the exam as a means to secure better results (UO, 09). Cheating attempts and pressure tactics aimed at compromising invigilators were also observed (UO, 08).

The MoE's first report confirmed various forms of student misconduct, including attempts to cheat in groups, pressure tactics on invigilators, and even bringing in "clever students" from other exam rooms to assist (MoE, Brief Report). Intimidation of other students, possession of prohibited materials like drugs and alcohol, and refusal of police inspection were also reported (MoE, Brief Report). These findings indicate a need for stricter enforcement of examination rules, awareness campaigns promoting fair conduct, and potentially revisiting the design of examination environments to minimize opportunities for cheating.

Student experiences during the national examination period varied, with some aspects raising concerns. One point of contention was the early cafeteria service starting at 4:00 AM, forced upon students to accommodate the large number of examinees before morning examinations (UO, 09). This early wake-up call, combined with potential food quality issues due to large-scale preparation, could have negatively impacted student sleep and well-being (UO, 05).

Instances of physical punishment (hitting) by security personnel and the presence of security personnel carrying machine guns within campuses raised concerns about student treatment and potential psychological distress (UO, 04). These practices might have further exacerbated the already stressful examination environment. The stress and anxiety experienced by students during the examination period culminated in strong reactions upon leaving the campuses. A university official's description of students bowing down and kissing the ground upon leaving campus highlights the extreme stress and potentially negative experiences some students faced during the examinations (UO, 04). While anecdotal, it underscores the importance of considering the overall student experience and creating a more positive and supportive environment during future examination periods.

Challenges related to parents
The new examination system also presented unique challenges for parents. Not accustomed to sending their children far away for examinations, many expressed concerns about their safety and well-being in unfamiliar environments. Interviews with parents revealed anxieties regarding unfamiliar surroundings, potential travel risks, and the separation from their children for an extended period. An official from EAES elaborated on these concerns, stating, "Parents asked for assurances about their children's safety when traveling to distant exam centers. These anxieties were addressed through open consultations and discussions with parents and local government authorities, focusing on logistical arrangements, security measures, and student support systems." (EAES, 02). While these consultations helped alleviate some concerns, it's worth considering pre-examination activities such as awareness workshops for parents on the new system, its benefits, and logistical details.

Gaining parental acceptance for the new examination system posed a significant challenge. Extensive discussions and assurances from government bodies were necessary to convince parents to let their children travel for exams (EAES, 02). An example from a regional official highlights this process: "Parents initially refused to send their children to Afar Region for the exam. Through extensive dialogue and addressing specific concerns about regional security, we were able to eventually convince them" (REBO, 23). This case provides valuable insights into effective strategies for future implementations, such as targeted outreach to address regional or cultural concerns.

Rumors circulating during the examination period also fueled parental anxieties. University officials reported parental stress due to uncertainty and fears related to student safety and examination integrity (UO, 04). This highlights the crucial need for clear communication channels and proactive measures to combat misinformation. Regularly updating parents on examination progress, addressing rumors transparently, and providing access to reliable information can help alleviate parental anxieties and maintain trust in the process. To fully understand the depth of parental worry, it's important to go beyond surface concerns and explore underlying reasons. While the desire for child safety is understandably paramount, there might be deeper cultural or social anxieties at play. This deeper understanding is vital for developing effective communication strategies and support systems that address parental concerns in a holistic manner.

Challenges related to universities

University staff faced various challenges during the examination period, one of which was a decline in motivation among some personnel. University official 01 highlighted the issue of overtime and inadequate compensation as potential contributing factors, stating, "Staff who initially worked with high motivation seemed to lose steam later, mainly due to concerns about payment." However, it's crucial to acknowledge that other factors like workload, lack of recognition, or unclear roles could also play a role in staff de-motivation. This can negatively impact the examination process through reduced efficiency, lowered morale, or potential errors. To address this, future implementations should consider fair compensation packages, clear communication of roles and expectations, appreciation programs, and workload management strategies.

The implementation of the new national examination also placed significant financial strain on universities. Interviews with university officials revealed a range of budget deficits, with estimates ranging from 12.5 million Birr (UO, 08) to 30 million Birr (UO, 09). This discrepancy between the budget allocated by the National Assessment and Examination Services (EAES) and the actual cost of conducting the examinations highlights a critical issue for future implementations. As UO, 01 stated, "The budget sent from the EAES, and the actual budget practically needed for accomplishing the examination program were not comparable." This lack of adequate funding forced universities to use their own resources, with UO, 01 reporting a "double budget requirement" compared to the allocated amount.

The new examination process significantly impacted the regular functioning of universities. UO, 01 described how the program "has disrupted the academic calendar significantly." The extended duration of the examination period, from Meskerem 28 to mid-Tikimt (approximately 18-19 days according to UO, 02), consumed valuable time from the academic calendar. This, as UO 06 pointed out, put pressure on the teaching and learning process, with several weeks diverted to managing the new examination system. To address these challenges in future implementations, accurate budgeting and resource allocation, efficient planning and scheduling (optimizing the examination period to minimize disruption to the academic calendar) and establishing clear communication channels between EAES and universities to address budgetary concerns and ensure smooth implementation should be among the prior measures to address financial and operational challenges faced by universities.

While universities aimed to provide satisfactory services to students, several pre-exam challenges and unexpected events arose. A university staff member tragically died in a car accident while transporting chairs to a campus (UO, 06). Several students also faced accidents on their way to assigned universities, with one fatality and 18 injuries reported by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2022). These unfortunate events highlight the need for thorough risk assessments and robust safety protocols for future student and staff travel during examinations.

Transportation costs exceeded initial estimates, with universities and districts bearing the brunt of the burden. Invigilator transportation costs exceeded expectations, with most requiring flights after negotiations, while others endured long land journeys (UO, 03). This contributed to the budget deficits faced by universities, as they covered or reimbursed invigilator travel expenses. Additionally, transporting students and materials like chairs and beds further burdened district budgets (UO, 03, 06, 09). As UO, 08 described, transporting 1700 chairs from Teachers' Training College to organize classrooms was a significant challenge. Future planning should account for realistic transportation costs and ensure adequate financial support from national entities to avoid burdening local institutions.

The influx of students for the new examination system overwhelmed university dormitory capacities. To accommodate everyone, universities resorted to overcrowding rooms, placing eight to ten students where six were intended, as reported by UO, 09. This created cramped and uncomfortable living conditions for students. Some universities scrambled to acquire extra beds and mattresses from nearby colleges or through rushed purchases, adding logistical pressure and financial strain (UO, 06; UO, 09). In other instances, universities even reallocated existing beds and mattresses between campuses to meet the demand.

The examination process significantly disrupted regular university functions, including teaching, research, and community services, for approximately four weeks. To compensate for lost teaching time, some universities considered implementing crash programs, even if it meant compromising educational quality (UO, 07). However, the Ministry of Education issued a circular prohibiting such programs, creating a dilemma for universities caught between fulfilling their educational mandate and adhering to the new examination system. As UO, 07 pointed out, the Ministry's directive prohibiting crash programs seemed contradictory to its own requirement of a full semester of sixteen weeks. The official highlighted the disconnect stating, "If it doesn't take a semester, this work [the examination management] will take about a month. So, that means cutting one month is mandatory. They say the semester should not be crashed; on the other hand, they say this is a national responsibility that the students have to take the examinations in the universities." This inconsistency in policy and unclear communication from the Ministry further compounded the challenges faced by universities.

Deploying a large number of university instructors as invigilators across regions presented significant challenges. The Ministry of Education's (MoE) policy of assigning invigilators to regions away from their own added a layer of complexity. This decision, while aiming to prevent bias and cheating, could be perceived as a demanding task, requiring travel, resource allocation, and adaptation to unfamiliar environments. Understandably, it might have led to some instructors needing "persuasion" to participate (UO, 03).

Lack of clear directives and communication regarding invigilator compensation, particularly issues of delayed or inadequate payments, emerged as a major grievance for both invigilators and universities (UO, 08). This created unnecessary frustration and hindered smooth implementation. Invigilators, unfamiliar with their assigned regions, expected universities to arrange proper accommodation and transportation. However, these expectations often fell short. Poor living conditions, inadequate food services, and lack of transportation assistance added to the discomfort and logistical challenges faced by invigilators (UO, 07). These challenges faced by invigilators negatively impacted the overall examination management. Dissatisfied and unsupported invigilators might face reduced motivation and potential lapses in performance, compromising the integrity of the examination process. To address these challenges and improve future implementations, it is important to re-evaluate the need for regional rotation of invigilators, balancing concerns about bias with practicality and resource allocation. Besides, it is essential to ensure clear communication of compensation details, prioritize timely and adequate payments, and establish complaint mechanisms for invigilators.

The budget allocated by the MoE for invigilator expenses proved insufficient, placing an unexpected financial burden on universities. Despite the expectation of reimbursement, universities had to cover transportation and lodging costs them, adding to their financial strain. The lack of communication from the MoE regarding invigilator accommodation needs created further difficulties. Universities, unprepared for arranging lodgings, found themselves scrambling to meet the demand when pressure arose from authorities and invigilators. This delay in planning proved detrimental, as UO, 06 points out: "When the pressure to do so came from authorities and the invigilators themselves, it was too late to do it." Finding suitable accommodation for a large influx of invigilators within a short timeframe proved challenging. The limited availability of hotels meeting the expected standards further exacerbated the problem. As UO, 06 describes, "almost all the hotels with the expected standard were already occupied," leaving universities struggling to secure adequate and safe lodgings for their assigned invigilators. This lack of foresight and coordination between the MoE and universities resulted in missed opportunities to secure adequate accommodation and ensure a smooth invigilation process.

> *Our assumption was that the exam invigilators will book the rooms for themselves since they were coming for examination. All of a sudden, people from MoE called and told us that we had to book rooms for them. At that time, there was a big conference here. The places where these teachers could stay had completely been booked. So, the teachers came to the university as soon as they reached here since they were told the rooms would have been booked for them. There was communication gap among the government agencies* (UO, 09).

Several universities encountered challenges stemming from student misconduct, including significant property damage caused by protesters (UO, 08) and reported instances of sexual harassment (UO, 09), in addition to breaches of university regulations and unauthorized entry into restricted areas. These incidents, despite orientation sessions on university regulations, highlight the need for further measures to address student misconduct.

Challenges related to regional education bureaus
Regional education bureaus, tasked with preparing and transporting students for the new examination system, faced significant logistical hurdles. The allocated budget from the Ministry of Education (MoE) proved inadequate to cover fuel and per diem costs for transporting students from rural districts to urban centers where universities were located. Consequently, many transport providers declined the service, forcing some regions to resort to using trucks instead of buses. Inadequate availability of vehicles and uncooperative drivers further compounded the issue. Drivers sometimes prioritized other routes, refused assigned locations, or delayed arrivals, causing disruptions to the exam schedule (REBO, 28). These challenges necessitated regional authorities to resort to forceful measures to secure transport services, adding another layer of complexity. These challenges highlight the critical role of adequate funding and efficient planning in implementing educational reforms. The experiences of regional bureaus underscore the need for a comprehensive review of budget allocation, improved collaboration with transport providers, and robust contingency plans to ensure smooth and equitable examination administration in the future.

The scarcity of proper transport forced some regions to resort to makeshift solutions, putting students at risk. Nightmarish scenarios unfolded as vehicles broke down, leaving students stranded in the countryside, vulnerable to the elements. Some students, transported in open trucks, endured the harshness of rain, while others waited for hours under the scorching sun, famished and thirsty. In one instance, students were stranded for an entire day without food or water, highlighting the potential severity of these logistical failures (REBO, 28). These incidents expose the unacceptable vulnerabilities faced by students due to inadequate transportation resources. Urgent action is needed to address budget shortfalls, ensure reliable transport providers, and establish emergency protocols to prevent such situations from repeating.

Challenges related to MoE and EAES
Moving nearly a million students, invigilators, and examination officials across regions presented a monumental logistical challenge for the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Educational Assessment and Examination Services (EAES). The critical shortage of transport vehicles stretched resources thin, forcing regions to scramble for solutions. With inadequate budgets allocated for transportation, some universities even resorted to diverting funds from their own operations, as highlighted in a regional education authority transcript: "The budget allocated was insufficient... we needed budget two-fold more than the sum allocated for us by the MoE" (REAE, 22).

Beyond transportation, MoE and EAES faced immense pressure in allocating human and material resources for the new examination system. The overall budget required was staggering, leaving allocated funds for universities and regional offices woefully inadequate. Consequently, institutions were forced to make do with limited resources, impacting their regular operations and potentially compromising the smooth conduct of examinations. As noted in the MoE's 2022 report, the sheer scale of the operation was staggering, requiring the movement of over 30,000 personnel and nearly 937,000 students. This massive undertaking exposed a crippling shortage of buses and vans, leading to delays, overcrowded vehicles, and compromised student safety.

Beyond logistical challenges, the MoE and EAES grappled with inadequate resource allocation. The allocated budget for universities and regional education offices fell woefully short of covering the immense costs of transportation, training, and security personnel. This shortfall forced universities to divert funds from their regular operations, as highlighted in a transcript from a regional education bureau official: "The budget allocated was insufficient... we needed two-fold more than the sum allocated for us by the MoE" (REAE, 22). These resource constraints had a cascading effect, impacting the quality of training for supervisors, compromising security measures, and further straining already overburdened universities.

The Ministry of Education's objective of eliminating examination cheating by hosting examinations at universities backfired in a big way when accommodation capacity fell drastically short of expectations. Tens of thousands of social science students found themselves without proper dorm beds, forcing universities to improvise under immense pressure. Students were sharing a single bed with another student for weeks during examinations. This was the reality for many in universities, where classrooms were hastily converted into sleeping quarters just to squeeze in the influx of students. As stated in an EAES official's response, "We pushed institutions to their absolute limits, even adapting classrooms as dormitories, just to accommodate everyone" (EAES, 02). This desperate scramble for space had serious consequences. Overcrowded campuses led to discomfort, frustration, and concerns about hygiene. More importantly, it compromised the very goal of preventing cheating. As pointed out by a regional education bureau official, "With so many students crammed into limited spaces, it became difficult to maintain proper supervision, and unfortunately, some cheating incidents did occur" (REAE, 21). The accommodation debacle highlights a critical flaw in the university-based examination system. While the intention was noble, the failure to adequately plan for student accommodation caused discomfort and hardship.

DISCUSSION

This article explored the challenges encountered during the first Ethiopian university-based national examination for Grade 12 students in September 2022. Addressing the question of "What are the main challenges faced by stakeholders involved in the examination process?", the article goes beyond logistical hurdles to highlight the crucial role of non-cognitive factors, particularly student well-being, in determining the effectiveness and broader impact of such large-scale assessments. The article argues that understanding these challenges can inform improvements in future examination management.

A central concern emerged regarding the prevalence of negative attitudes and low motivation among students taking the examination. This raises ethical questions about potential long-term consequences of high-stakes assessments on student well-being. Research by Nilsen et al. (2022) reinforces this, demonstrating a positive correlation between student motivation and academic achievement.

Several factors likely fueled the students' negative attitudes towards the examinations. The immense pressure attached to these examinations for university entrance and future success acted as a heavy burden, leading to anxiety and low motivation (UNESCO, 2022). Many students suffered from sleep deprivation and health issues, negatively impacting their well-being and performance, as confirmed by participants' reports and research like Kristi et al. (2019). Furthermore, anxieties about future paths and uncertainties linked to examination performance fueled negativity and demoralization. Kearns (2011) highlights how high-stakes assessments can create a sense of isolation and neglect for student well-being, further exacerbating anxieties and stress. This complex interplay of factors contributed significantly to the students' negative attitudes.

The Ethiopian national examination faced additional hurdles beyond student well-being. Misinformation and malicious rumors spread by some students sowed confusion and disrupted the examination process for others. The examination also caused unintended collateral damage, with students damaging university facilities and property, raising concerns about responsibility and respect. Hosting the examination disrupted regular university functions for weeks, impacting teaching, research, and community services. Budgetary constraints became a major issue, with universities facing significant deficits due to increased costs. This highlighted the need for efficient resource allocation and robust financial planning for future assessments. Finally, concerns were raised regarding transportation logistics, security measures to prevent cheating, and the overall efficiency of examination administration. These additional challenges paint a complex picture of the Ethiopian national examination, necessitating a multifaceted approach to ensure future assessments are effective, equitable, and well-managed.

Beyond individual health, the schooling process itself fuels student stress (Banks & Smyth, 2015). Adolescents facing high-stakes examinations like the Ethiopian national tests often wrestle with self-doubt and anxieties, leading to demotivation, physical health problems, and even psychological damage. This is further validated by OECD data (2017, 2019) showing widespread student anxieties about examinations across member countries. These findings demand a crucial shift in focus for future

Ethiopian national examinations. Prioritizing student well-being alongside academic achievement should be a guiding principle. Programs for sleep hygiene, health awareness, and stress management can equip students to navigate examination pressures. Cultivating a positive examination culture through celebrating successes and fostering open communication can shift the focus towards learning and growth, not just ranking. By acknowledging the vital role of student well-being, future assessments can evolve into tools that empower students, promote holistic learning, and prioritize healthy growth alongside academic achievement.

Hosting the national examinations triggered significant disruptions and financial burdens for participating universities. Regular university functions like teaching, research, and community services were halted for weeks, impacting both students and faculty. Additionally, universities incurred substantial budget deficits exceeding Ministry of Education allocations due to increased costs like security and logistics. This financial strain further burdened institutions already coping with student challenges. Some students with chronic illnesses faced examination anxieties compounded by restrictions on bringing essential medication, potentially affecting their performance. Moreover, disruptive behaviors like spreading misinformation and causing property damage to cast a shadow on the examination process and created an unsettling atmosphere for many students.

CONCLUSION
Ethiopia's first university-based National Examination for grade 12 students was a bold experiment, yet it revealed a multitude of challenges. While the objective of reducing examination irregularities was achieved, the cost to students' well-being, university resources, and overall efficiency demands careful consideration. Student wellbeing emerged as a key concern. The increased pressure, anxieties, and long-distance travel negatively impacted performance. Future iterations must prioritize reducing student stress through improved communication, supportive measures, and a re-evaluation of transport logistics. Universities bore the brunt of logistical and financial burdens. The significant budget deficits and disruptions to regular activities highlight the need for better financial support and streamlined workflows. Universities deserve clear guidelines and adequate resources to effectively manage such large-scale events. The ESSLCE model necessitates further refinements. While eliminating cheating is paramount, it should not come at the expense of student well-being and institutional resources. Future implementations should incorporate feedback from all stakeholders, prioritizing a balanced approach that ensures examination integrity without compromising holistic student success. The lessons learned from this pioneering experience pave the way for improvements, ensuring not only secure examinations but also a positive and supportive environment that maximizes student potential. By prioritizing student well-being, optimizing university resources, and continuously refining the ESSLCE management model, Ethiopia can set viable standard for effective national examinations.

RECOMMENDATIONS
The challenges identified in this study necessitate action on multiple fronts to ensure effective assessment practices for future national examinations in Ethiopia. Firstly, collaborative planning and streamlined procedures are essential. The Ministry of Education and universities should work together well before the examination, mapping student numbers, budget needs, and establishing standardized procedures through comprehensive guidelines. This transparency and collaboration will ensure smoother execution across all examination centers. In this line, designing open and timely communication between the Ministry and universities is crucial throughout the process, eliminating confusion and fostering trust. Secondly, strengthening student support is recommended. Schools should conduct thorough pre-exam orientation sessions for students, focusing on psychological adjustment techniques, stress management strategies, and coping skills. This proactive approach can significantly reduce anxiety and improve performance. Besides, it is important to address student concerns regarding travel, food services, health issues, and security. Thirdly, it is important to optimize ESSLCE management by allocating sufficient funding, looking for alternative examination locations and arranging provisions for students with chronic illness. The Ministry of Education should allocate adequate budget to universities to effectively manage the examination without compromising their regular activities. This ensures smooth functioning of both systems. Exploring alternative examination locations outside universities is also recommended to reduce long-distance travel for students and minimize disruption to university routines. Finally, implementing measures to ensure students' well-

being throughout the examination process, including access to healthcare professionals and stress-reduction resources are crucial. Furthermore, it is important to gather feedback from students, universities, and other stakeholders to refine future ESSLCE implementations.

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