FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Prominent Issues on the First University-Based Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESSLCE) Management

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on the prominent issues pertinent to the first university-based ESSLCE management, which were derived from qualitative data collected from purposively chosen university officials, university clinic health professionals, education bureau officials, education bureau assessment experts, invigilators, students, and National Examination and Assessment Services (NEAS) documents. Commendable commitments, deep concerns over the quality of education, the need for research-based decisions, claims of differential treatments, concerns over budget and payment, characterization of a single-method approach as deficient, the role of context-driven solutions, attribution of challenges to poor pre-planning and preparation, coercive measures, and consequential pressures on teachers were identified as outstanding issues. Meticulous planning and fitting prior preparation, awareness-creation and sensitization, discussions and dialogues, holistic and evidence-based measures, and participatory and fair actions are recommended for better ESSLCE management in the future.

Keywords: Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESSLCE); Management; MoE; NEAS; Prominent issues

INTRODUCTION

The intricate interplay and interdependence between teaching, learning and testing is recognized in the field of education (Getachew, Tamene & Rufael, 2023; Panizzon, 2019), necessitating the use of various test types in the teaching-learning process (Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka, 2001). For example, when we intend to compare the achievement of an individual with that of a group, class, and school, or to evaluate students' progress over a period of time (on a summative basis), we utilize standardized achievement tests (SATs) (Sussman & Wilson, 2019). Such tests serve as a standard for placing in or admitting students to certain programs (Manjarres, 2005), evaluating the quality of education (Manjarres, 2005), and preventing partialities (Beikmahdavi, 2016).

The development (planning, construction, evaluation, and validation) of SATs requires the participation of test construction specialists, usually with the assistance of curriculum experts, teachers, and school administrators, to produce relevant, valid, and reliable measurements (Chaudhary & Tyagi, 2017). These tests often take a long time to construct and are administered and scored according to specific and agreed-upon standards. Hence, constructing the test on the basis of

meticulous analysis of the instructional objectives is crucial and requires expert judgements (Ann, 2004). The process can thus be cost-intensive and lead to accountability, which calls for program evaluation (input, process, and product) to draw prominent implications for well-worked out interventions (Frederiksen & White, 2004). Besides, researchers frequently utilize data from SATs for accountability purposes (Lipsley, 1990; Rhue & Zumbo, 2008). Thus, SATs, such as the ESLCE, can have notable implications that various educational actors can use for future decisions and actions (Schoenfeld, 2006).

National examinations, such as standardized achievement tests (SATs), are intended to determine the level of achievement of the education system or an explicitly specified portion of it (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2004). SATs provide evidence on the outcomes of schooling such as student achievement plus similarities or disparities among schools in terms of meeting standards. They are also used to generate evidence for policymaking.

Accordingly, standardized national examinations (SNEs), a form of feedback, serve various functions (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2020), the following being the major ones. Firstly, evidence from SNEs is used to determine students' future educational and vocational prospects. Secondly, they help to control the various parties (teachers, students, schools, districts, etc.) of the education system. Thirdly, they help to evaluate the level of education and allow for carrying out corrective interventions. Fourthly, SNEs can inform policy reform or formulation.

SATs, including SNEs, determine students' future academic and career directions (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2004). That is, SATs are used to make decisions on whether the students should be promoted to the next level or not. For example, ESSLCE results are used to select students for admission to universities. The norm-referenced evaluation system usually used in SATs allows for comparison of an individual student's test performance with that of other students in the reference group: "These [SATs] typically are norm-referenced tests that measure students' level of achievement in various content and skill areas by comparing their test performance with that of other students in some general reference group (e.g. a nationwide sample of students at the same grade level" (Miller, Linn & Gronlund, 2009, p.397). This facilitates decisions regarding who should move to the next level and who should be detained.

Secondly, SATs can have a certification function (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2020). Apart from serving as a mechanism to select students for the continuation of education, SATs can result in formal certification. Certification (e.g. a high school diploma) can help students gain access to employment or career training. In other words, students who have acquired certificates for completion of a particular academic program can join scholarships, or pursue careers after receiving training.

Overall, SNEs, or SATs generally, play important roles in determining students' academic and vocational prospects, help to control the various parties of the education system, provide evidence for the evaluation of the level of education, and in effect, initiate corrective interventions. They inform policy reform or policy formulation. Thus, meticulous planning, effective process monitoring, and impartial treatment of all test-takers are crucial in the management of SNEs, such as the ESSLCE. To this end, the evidence-based decision is vitally important in this undertaking since evidence is instrumental in educational decision-making (Gordon & Conaway, 2020). Evidence obtained from such examinations must hence be used cautiously and productively. It follows that the prominent implications should be gauged and utilized properly for a better effect.

SATs can be used as summative evaluation tools for making decisions about student learning compared with certain standards, providing educators and educational decision-makers with evidence about what worked well and what went wrong (Geiser & Santelices, 2007). In other words, such tests facilitate high-stakes decisions that have long-term repercussions on students' futures. Furthermore, according to Geiser and Santelices, SATs generate information for improving curriculum and instruction. Thus, effective SATs can help to troubleshoot setbacks in the education system and serve as quality control mechanisms (Hart et al., 2015).

Data from SATs can also be used for accountability purposes (Hart et al., 2015). This helps to evaluate schools, districts, and other relevant entities in terms of their performances measured against standards (Sussan & Wilson, 2019). This notion is implicated in the following quote:

> Assessment results, along with other measurement data (such as those obtained through periodic surveys), are valuable tools for educational institutions. They assist in evaluating the effectiveness of institutional practices by tracking the functioning of different components of the assessment system (generally referred to as national assessments), sometimes holding the individuals responsible for…, contributing to decision-making about the functioning of departments, programs and curricula, and providing potential measures to be taken to improve all the cornerstones of an educational system. (Ghaicha, 2016, p. 214)

However, as Sussan and Wilson (2019) emphasize, thoughtful use of SATs for summative evaluation of new curricular interventions is crucial. Therefore, the data from SATs, such as SNEs (e.g. ESSLCE), should be devised and managed cautiously so that they can be used as effective evidence for quality control and accountability purposes; the outstanding implications of these tests should also be judiciously mapped.

The need for evidence-based education has been established for a long (Pellegrini & Vivanet, 2021). Emphasis has thus been placed upon the use of evidence in policy-related decision-making. In other words, SATs, including SNEs, are among the sources of evidence for educational decision-making. Information from SATs can help to improve educational policymaking and management, which in turn shapes instructional practice (Miller, Linn & Gronlund, 2009). Hess (2022) believes that SAT results provide education policy-makers with objective and comparable evidence about students' performance, enabling them to judge schools and districts through a common measurement. Therefore, SNEs management systems should be institutionalized and infused into the structures and processes of government policymaking (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2004). As Kellaghan and Greaney (2004, p. xiv) further explain, "This will require a national assessment to be aligned with other major instructional guidance systems of the education system, along with other assessment systems (including the alignment of standards), curricula, teacher education, school capacity building, and measures to address inequities".

According to Miller, Linn and Gronlund (2009), SATs are the subject of critical discussion and intense debates in the US, sometimes raising serious concerns about their qualities to serve various functions, including informing educational policymaking. Thus, the various actors in the education system should understand the important role SATs (e.g. SNEs) play as sources of evidence for educational policymaking; there exists a need to make concerted efforts towards successful management of such examinations so that dependable evidence can be generated from such tests for policy reform and policy formulation. This requires, among other things, understanding the prominent implications of the process and outcomes of the execution of SATs (e.g. the new ESSLCE management), which has attracted great public attention and generated various discourses (Berhanu, et al., 2023).

In Ethiopia, the ESLCE, formerly called Matriculation, Ethiopian School Leaving Examination (ESLCE), and Ethiopian University Entrance Certificate Examination (EUECE), has been given as a higher education entrance standardized national examination since 1954 (Lemma & Menna, 2022). From its commencement to the year 2021, this examination was principally administered in school centers. However, in 2022, universities were used as centers for the administration of this examination, the purpose being to reduce exam stealing and cheating. This phenomenon incurred huge investment of resources and generated concrete professional, media, and public discourses. It also faced different challenges. As a result, the prominent implications can be crucial for future decisions and interventions. However, due to the recency of the practice, empirical evidence is lacking regarding the outstanding issues pertaining to this examination management. Therefore, this article, informed by the following conceptual framework, looks into the prominent issues concerning this novel experience to provide empirical evidence for future decisions and interventions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis in this article is framed by the concept of the 'feedback loop'. As Ahmadi, et al. (2021, p.21) describe it, "feedback loop is perceptual information, such as thoughts, feelings, and perceptions

from the beneficiaries about the program, service, or product they have received". The feedback loop is thus a cycle of soliciting feedback and acting on the feedback to improve decisions and practice (Whittle & Campbell, 2019). Feedback loops are two-way processes that require inputs from both sides: program/service receivers, i.e., beneficiaries, on one side and the program/service providers on the other. Feedback loops require different steps (e.g. collecting data, analyzing the data, presenting and discussing the feedback, discussing the feedback with stakeholders, and adapting and making changes based on the feedback) (Whittle, 2015).

This article intends to identify the prominent issues from the first university-based ESSLCE management in the form of feedback. Accordingly, data were collected from key stakeholders (participants from the beneficiary side), and prominent issues were drawn from the analysis, which will be communicated to the providers (MoE and EAES) through publications and other academic platforms. It is also hoped that the providers will make interventions aimed at improving the ESSLCE management that contributes to the quality of education. Therefore, the feedback loop is deemed to be an appropriate conceptual model for the issue covered in this article, as shown in Figure 1.
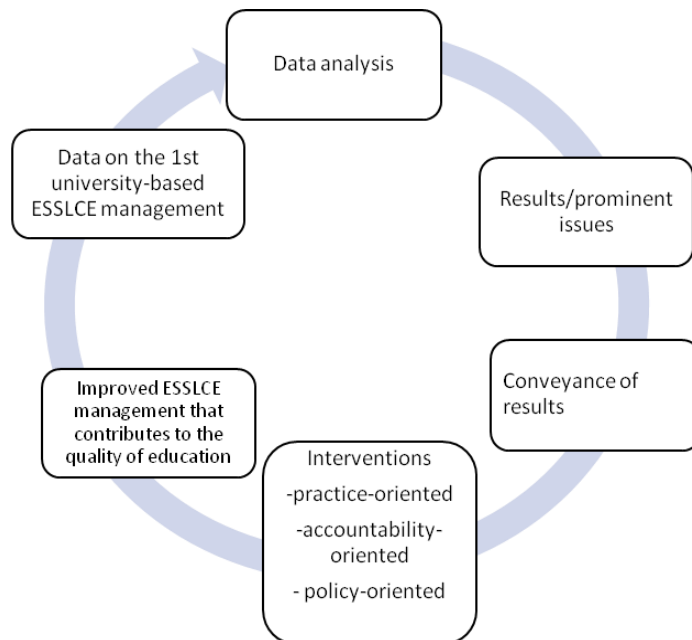
Figure 1: Conceptual framework as adapted from Ahmadi, et al. (2021, p.3)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design
This study employed a qualitative survey design. Unlike the quantitative survey, which aims to describe numerical distributions of variables in the population and focuses on the representativeness of the sample, the qualitative survey aims to determine the diversity of the topic of interest within a given population (Jansen, 2010). According to Jansen, the qualitative survey does not intend to count the number of people with the same characteristic (value of variable), but it aims to establish the meaningful variation (relevant dimensions and values) within that population concentrating on the exploration of meanings and experiences. In general, qualitative survey research seeks to interpret an issue (e.g. experiences, ideas, and opinions) holistically and in more depth (Jansen, 2010).

This report in this article is based on data collected from diverse sources to interpret the issue under study holistically and deeply. One dataset was obtained from university officials across 10 universities.

The second dataset was generated from university clinics' health professionals. The third dataset was found from officials and assessment experts of 10 educational bureaus distributed across eight regional states and two city administrations. Fourthly, some data were also acquired from invigilators (previous and current) and students. Finally, some MoE and EAES documents were also used as sources of data. Overall, the participants of the study were thought to have diverse experiences and views about the new ESSLCE management. Thus, the use of qualitative survey design allowed for the collection of data from multiple sources with multiple perspectives, which helped to make in-depth interpretations to derive the prominent issues from the first university-based ESSLCE management.

Sources of data

As highlighted above, this article is based on data gathered from various sources: University Officials (UOs), University Clinics' Health Professionals (UCHPs), Education Bureau Officials (REBOs), Education Bureau Assessment Experts (REAEs), invigilators, and students. **Some EAES documents** were also used as sources of data. Eight regional states and two city administrations were included purposively. Then, educational bureaus and universities in the capitals of the regional states and city administrations were chosen using a convenient sampling method. Again, educational bureau officials and assessment experts were sampled purposively. Accordingly, 63 in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants, and four key documents of the MoE and the EAES were analyzed. More explicitly, 12 university officials, 11 university clinics' health professionals, eight regional education bureau officials, two city administration education bureau officials, eight regional educational bureau assessment experts, two city administration education bureau assessment experts, six current invigilators, three previous invigilators, and three students participated in-depth interviews.

Data collection instruments

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analyses. Therefore, the data collection instruments used were interview guides and document analysis checklists. Since interviews were held with six groups of participants (university officials, university clinic health professionals, education bureau officials, education bureau assessment experts, invigilators, and students), six interview guides were used. The interview guides and the document analysis checklists were prepared based on the objectives of the study and insights gained from the literature review.

Methods of data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis (TA) is "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.2). By searching for meaning (themes) across a qualitative dataset, TA thus enables the researcher to identify and make sense of recurring experiences and patterns of meanings (Dawadi, 2020). Likewise, the datasets were first studied carefully to establish general impressions. Then, further data inspection and coding were undertaken. From the codes and further codes, categories and sub-categories were identified. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was carried out and the findings were interpreted accordingly.

Ethical considerations

Firstly, ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at Jimma University (CEBS 36/2015). Secondly, support letters were submitted to the respective offices of the universities and education bureaus. Then, after permissions were ensured, the purpose, methods, and procedures of the inquiry were explained to the study participants. Besides, for the sake of anonymity, personal identifiers were not used in the report. Oral consent was obtained from each participant; participation was voluntary; and interviews were scheduled in consultation with the participants. Data were collected properly from the right sources, and results were reported genuinely.

RESULTS

The implementation of huge projects, the accomplishment of big programs, the undertaking of far-reaching schemes, and the execution of high-stakes tasks can be accompanied by prominent implications. Accordingly, this article focuses on the prominent issues (notable commitment, deep

concerns over the quality of education, the need for research-based decisions, claims of differential treatments, concerns over budget and payment, characterization of a single-method approach as deficient, the role of context-driven solutions, attribution of setbacks to poor pre-planning and preparation, coercive measures, and consequential pressures on teachers) that emerged from data on the first university-based ESSLCE management.

Notable commitment

The commitment of the concerned actors during the execution of the new ESSLCE management was noteworthy, and in effect, responsibilities were discharged relatively efficiently. The achievements that were registered were the outcomes of individual and group commitments that led to concerted efforts. Thus, this notable commitment can be taken as an outstanding issue as described below:

> Whatever the case may be, the universities committed themselves to entertaining the students as per the directives they were given by the Ministry of Education. One of the reasons for the success of the job, as for me, was the commitment of the presidents of the universities; they did not lead others under them, but they themselves were led to make it a success while administrating the exam. (UO 5)

One supervisor also reported a similar observation that is shown in the following text:

> The experience I got from the new exam management practice was that every stakeholder stands against exam cheating issues. Citizens are highly committed to avoiding the problem. There was collaboration among supervisors, invigilators and security officers. There was a highly concerted effort among everybody involved. I think there was a high commitment from all the people involved in the exam management. (Current Supervisor 5)

The following response also supports the views explained above: "We need to thank universities; we all are responsible for the success of this task. The efforts our universities made, as citizens, for the success of the program were very great. We assigned double the number the universities are able to serve" (REBO 28). However, not all the people involved were equally committed. For example, coercive measures were taken on some transporters who, for various reasons, lacked the expected level of commitment to transport students to and from the host universities (see section on coercive measures).

Quality of education

One of the prominent issues in this study is the grave concern among the participants over the deteriorated quality of education. The participants expressed their belief that serious measures should be taken to rescue the education sector. One such measure is working against exam cheating as reflected in this response: "How it could be is one thing, but students should never be allowed to copy from each other. This practice is deteriorating the country; it is destroying the entire nation" (UCHP 1). The following text also highlights the concern:

> Firstly, we have learned that the previous ways were totally wrong, and fully flawed. We have seen this both in the results and the process. During the process, we have witnessed that students were leaving the exam rooms within twenty minutes of the two-hour exam, just by filling the answer sheets randomly. From this, we can learn that we were not properly preparing our students throughout in the system. They were not promoted from grades to grades in a proper manner. The new exam management system gave us strong evidence that the previous system should be seriously examined and scrutinized. (UO 7)

The following excerpt also strengthens the concerns reflected in the above transcripts:

> We have seen that students were coming to universities without anything at all. ... That means, they complete high school and join universities by copying from others. .... They won't be successful even if they graduate and depart from here. They do not have the competence. We have seen the signs very well now so that the problem should be solved. This exam administration has shown us that problem. If we find the problem, the solution will follow. The problem begins from the elementary school level, beginning from the KG level. ... The elementary level student transfers to high school having nothing at all and then comes here. The university also deploys deficient graduates to the various work places. ... Now, we can

work for the solution, beginning from the elementary level. It should not be at the high school or at the university level; the problem needs to be addressed beginning from the elementary level, at the KG level. (UO 1)

The responses of a health professional are also in agreement with the concerns expressed above: "Students pass high school classes by cheating and join universities; previously we did not hear students who have failed; it is better to avoid the practices of joining university massively and graduating massively" (UCHP 8). This participant thus seems to have the belief that students should be examined properly, join universities based on merit; and become capable citizens upon graduation. This belief is similar to the one in the following text:

> The second lesson that we got from the examination is that the education sector has immense problems, including students' psychological problems and unfair grade-to-grade promotions. It showed us that education should not be left to the education sector and the educational professionals alone; fixing the breakage of the education system has been taken as an immense project that requires public mobilization. Also, universities, as universities, should do all they can for this cause, which requires concerted actions and public mobilization. (UO 3)

UO 3 emphasized that the examination uncovered the crisis the education sector is undergoing, which necessitates appraisal of the whole education system: the teaching-learning process, the educational management (which includes several actors), the curricula and the assessment and evaluation methods. Overall, the sample responses cited thus far show the deep concern the participants had over the quality of education. It should be noted that people have been critical of the problem and urged the concerned parties to solve it through appropriate decisions and concerted endeavors. In this connection, the following quote can be an appropriate recap.

> The system is rigged and corrupted. We need to work hard till the system gets back to normal and good status. We need to make necessary financial, material and other preparations. We need to contextualize the new system in such a way to fit to the lower grades. The level of corruption and poor quality from which our education system is suffering and need for getting our education system back to normal, require us to pay costs pedagogically, psycho-socially, economically, etc.' (UO 4)

However, the fact that the participants agreed that the new examination management indicated the educational crisis in Ethiopia does not mean that it is a flawless or sufficient approach. Instead, critical views were generated from participants regarding the efficacy of this approach. For instance, this single method was considered as deficient because the educational disaster in Ethiopia cannot be curbed by focusing only on examination (see section on a single method as a deficient solution).

Research-based decision
Another prominent issue identified in the study is the need for research-based decisions. It is viewed that decisions, like the shift in the management of the Grade 12 National Examination management, which have immense implications, should be founded on empirical evidence. It thus follows that researched evidence is crucially important so that such decisions can yield the desired result. Concerning this, one participant noted:

> The issue of examination also needs further study. It should not be decided based on the will of politicians. Society should be asked about the examination starting from lower grades. The discussion to alleviate educational failure needs to start from elementary school by participating schools, parents, teacher-parent committee, and teachers. How students get a better result must be shown through research. The examination system applied in 2014 E.C has positive and negative consequences. It was a sudden encounter for students. Therefore, the examination system must be supported with research evidence. (UO 10)

The above argument shows that the participant (UO 10) believed that the views of the different stakeholders (schools, parents, teacher-parent committees, and teachers) about alternative ways of examination management must be solicited. This can be done through discussions, consultations and dialogues. However, in the concluding sentence, the participant reiterates the role of research to gather

relevant evidence from these and other sources. Another participant expressed a similar view: "Now, research studies are being conducted, like the one you are doing; the results will be discussed and discourses will be constructed accordingly, which will help to improve the examination management" (UO 3).

Differential treatments

It is known that only university instructors and personnel were involved, as invigilators and exam coordinators, in the actual administration of the 2021/22 ESSLCE. High school teachers, regional officials and experts, and officials and experts from city administrations were not allowed to participate in this task. This created feelings of being neglected and discontentment. For example, one participant said, "High school teachers were not involved; this is a discouragement for them," (Current Invigilator 3), while another one had the following to say: "Pedagogically, education is meant to change and shape citizens; I feel that there is a problem in this regard, and there has to be merit-based trust on high school educators. Otherwise, if it will continue like this, the pedagogical feasibility issue will remain under question," (Current Invigilator 5).

Regional officials and experts also claimed that differential treatments were made against them and students: "How can the MoE be trusted than the regional, zonal and woreda officials? I think the lower level officials have to be allowed to enter examination centers and play roles to possibly make the exam administration more efficient and more effective," (REAE 24). This response pertains to the officials and possibly to experts. However, there were also claims of differential treatments against students such as "Also, because of politics, there were bad treatments from some invigilators; therefore, these have to be solved for the other generations," (a student participant); and "Invigilators who came from other universities mistreating students, i.e. reporting violations in 'silency' without explanations and without adherence to appropriate reporting procedures, and disqualifying the work of the entire group of students in one exam hall due to rule violation by one student or few students," (REAE 24).

Some participants also reported that there were differences in payment execution. That is, it was reported that payments were made inconsistently across and within institutions. One such instance is reflected in the following quote:

> Despite a directive, it was not exhaustive enough to treat invigilators' payment cases on tax treatment. Furthermore, there were also some inconsistencies among universities and city administrations. Even, as per our institution's context, they were not paid on time. Hence, it is better to have a transparent and consistent system throughout the country. Such type of inconsistency has a negative impact on the next round of deployment of invigilators, and as well, it has negative implications for the institution's name; it will be perceived as not properly hosting its guests. Even, the payment that we made becomes an audit finding in our institution for the invigilators and staff who engaged in this process. (UO 5)

A similar concern is also reflected in the transcript presented below. It is evident from the response that the participant is expressing concern and discontentment regarding budget deficit and irregularities in effecting payments:

> The institution should also spend some budget; it should not be simply deploying professionals on the ground of 'You have to do the work that is prescribed from above'. I feel that there was this gap before. The other issue is, maybe it is not relevant [now], the benefit, or we can call it 'compensation', you get after you have accomplished the work. We hear that it was not the same here and elsewhere. We thought that once someone got the work done, done more properly than elsewhere; it was not logical not to compensate for the professional services. We have to say 'thank you' for the service we obtained. And, we thought that contractual agreements should have been made in advance of the work. We felt we were denied. (UCHP 3)

To conclude, experiences of partial treatments were claimed by some participants. This claim, coupled with similar dire experiences, can have unpleasant consequences. For example, in addition to the pressure it exerts on students' emotions and examination results, it can trigger questions of

examination fairness, which is liable to undesirable social media consumption and politicization, given the situational context of the ESSLCE management in focus. Therefore, fair treatment of all examinees should be one of the focus areas of all the parties involved in managing the ESSLCE and other similar examinations.

Budget and payment

Another prominent issue pertains to concerns over budget and payment. For example, deficient budgetary planning and poor payment procedures are raised as concerns in the following transcript:

> … The budget allocated by the Ministry has to be enough, or else if that is not possible, the universities should be communicated to use their own budget to support what is already budgeted for the purpose by the Ministry, with some guidelines as to how the payment should be made. ... Just, I have to make it clear now in the meantime that the staff here was very much disappointed. I found it difficult to convince people and coordinate the second-round [the natural science round] examination. As you know, people working under your supervision expect their payment from your side. It would have been impossible to administer the second if the first-round payment had not been made, and now the third one is coming, and it will be too difficult to manage it then. … So, I think they should thoroughly evaluate the former budgeting. Then, they have to adequately allocate, or if there is any problem, they could say let the universities share some amount of the burden. They should still make some limits on the amount, and they have to make the payment guidelines quite clear. (UO 1)

Accordingly, the insufficient budget was also a concern among some participants as emphasized in the response provided below. As noted below, the money allocated for students' expenditures was described as utterly insufficient. It was also noted that attempts made to acquire additional budget were not productive. The following transcript also contains a health professional's complaints concerning budget deficit:

> We were given just 25 Birr, which is really a meager amount, for each student during the current ESSLCE. This was too insufficient for us. The action was just like throwing the money at us whether we liked it or not. They were not willing to hear the further request that we made for an additional budget. This should be improved in the future. I also believe that at least 50 percent of our clinic staff need psychological and economic support. We have evaluated this situation as a big challenge. Thus, we are prepared to present this proposal to the concerned bodies. We will do it when we have tangible or verified information, that confirms that the next ESSLCE will be given at the university. … (UCHP 9)

A single method as a deficient solution

The overarching rationale for administering the ESSLCE at universities was to ensure the quality of education by controlling exam stealing and cheating. However, some participants argued that a single measure cannot be a panacea for rescuing our education. They viewed education quality as a summative outcome that requires a holistic approach to bring about. For instance, one university official presented the following argument:

> But the action taken now [the new Grade 12 National Examination Management System] is one of the controlling mechanisms. Furthermore, as a nation, we have to work more on education inputs, context and processes to improve and sustain the quality of education. In this regard, the sector needs a holistic approach instead of sticking to product control only: for instance, starting from building teachers' capacity, fulfilling teaching aid materials, infrastructure, revising curriculum as per the desired state of the country's destination in addition to the current attempt to harmonize curricula among universities, depending on current status gap with the desired state that the country aspires to be in the near future. Moreover, as a country, we have to work to produce graduates that have holistic [cognitive, emotional, social, and moral] qualities. (UO 5)

Another participant has the same perspective as the above one. This participant uses the metaphor of a house to illustrate how children should be built educationally. The argument is that a house should be built on a strong foundation, and this applies to nurturing children academically:

… If you build the base with mud but the wall and the roof with other quality materials, it cannot be a good house. This means that to ensure quality education, it has to be started from the elementary school level. Being reluctant with lower school grades and making things too strong at Grade 12 is not important. If one student has to fail at a lower level, he has to fail. Let him repeat and change himself. At grades 4, 5, 6, and 11, he has to fail. … (UCHP 9)

Context-driven solutions

Context-driven solutions were also apparent in some universities during the examination. One example of this is the involvement of spiritual fathers and the elderly in crisis management (e.g. "Religious fathers and elderly people helped with persuading striking students to return to the examination,") (REAE 24). Besides, when it comes to health services, the expectation was that students would seek professional healthcare when they became ill during the examination period. While this was commonly the case, however, some students sought spiritual treatments. As such, some of these students refused medical treatment, and thus required spiritual solutions, as exemplified below:

> They asked us to bring a priest to pray for them, and … to give them religious treatment by using the Holy Quran. Some students didn't want to take injections. When they were sick, they fell down. They stayed with the disease for a long time, and most of them came from the same environment. They didn't want to get any health services from health professionals; rather, they preferred to get religious treatment or read the Bible or the Quran. Otherwise, they decided to leave the exam and go back home. Thus, not to create undesirable arguments with them, I advised and sent them to take the exam. Then, I informed a student who was a deacon to pray for a sick student in the corridor after the exam. Finally, they said that she had recovered and went to her dormitory. (UCHP 10)

A similar experience was also reported by another health professional. This participant explained that, although spiritual treatments were not explicitly encouraged by the health professionals who were involved in treating cases, such context-driven solutions were also evident:

> … There was also another encounter. I was overseeing the situation by moving around the examination halls, especially around the auditorium here. When some students became ill and fell down on the ground, our healthcare providers tried to give them medical treatment. However, they [the patients] preferred being treated by religious fathers. Although we did not encourage this directly, we allowed them to obtain the treatment they insisted on. There are priests and deacons on this campus. The priests touched over their [the patients'] bodies with the cross and treated them with holy water. Then, they [the patients] recovered and returned to their exams. Upon request, we also permitted ambulance transportation of students who demanded to be taken to churches and mosques. (UCHP 3)

The above illustrative cases demonstrate that context-driven solutions were utilized to manage pressing problems. The involvement of spiritual fathers and the elderly in conflict resolution, to assist the formal structural procedures, is one example. Secondly, spiritual treatment was used, when insisted, instead of sole reliance on modern medication. This, as a prominent issue, can suggest that holistic and multi-stake solutions helped to mitigate crises during the ESSLCE administration.

Attributions

Challenges and problems can result in some sort of attributions (e.g. "We were not informed well to get well prepared from grade 9 and 10 from our schools; in this aspect, we got surprised and were challenged, too" (Student 1). Obviously, as a huge national project, the new ESSLCE management faced several challenges of different degrees of severity (as reported in another article). The participants of this study mainly attributed these challenges, including the "… abrupt introduction of the new ESSLCE management without properly working on the bases is a difficult one," (UCHP 8), to pitfalls in pre-planning that pertain to resources, budget, scheduling, student preparation and transportation, logistic mobilization, communication, and case handling. This attribution is evident in the text below:

> We need to ask if the public have really understood the objective. We might not benefit during the first round, but in the next one, we need to ask for and plan a moderate way of

compensating even if it would be difficult to correct everything and make it perfect. It is good to plan early, i.e. prior to the commencement. When should the students come here? I remember that during the first round, I heard the students were to come only a day before they arrived. We should have been informed and got ourselves ready, as health practitioners. When a health professionals' team is planning for a field trip, it could be for a campaign, it will require planning of resources necessary for that. So, all the things required for the campaign are listed out earlier. (UCHP 1)

The following response describes the problem from a schedule point of view. It argues that one of the challenges faced before was the disruption of schedules that resulted from failures in prior situational analysis and planning:

The examination severely affected the University's calendar; that was one difficulty. It is necessary to adjust the academic calendar in advance. In order for universities could have adjusted their calendars, the schedule of the national examination should have been sent and communicated earlier. It is vital to analyze the realities of each university and the realities of the country. Well, of course, the country, um, much of the country is rural where there are transportation problems; there is also the issue of rivers being full. I believe that these should be considered and the examination administered when most of the universities are on closure. (UO 3)

The argument in the following text also indirectly points out that challenges were experienced, due to a lack of efficient advance budgetary planning, during the administration of the new examination management approach.

As a government, it needs to allocate an appropriate budget and make schedules in advance by estimating appropriate costs relying on tangible cost drivers instead of exerting huge efforts at a time. Hence, in this aspect, the MoE and the EAES have to ensure the funds required to accomplish the intended exam administration. Otherwise, it affects the tertiary education system's operation [including schedules) from year to year. (UO 5)

The challenge concerning schedules, which resulted from deficient pre-planning, is also capitalized in the text presented below. The respective participant, through this response, stressed the critical need for pre-planning, which allows for adequate advance preparation, adjustment, and communication:

Even universities were notified when the time was very short and even thinking how to use the capacity they had at hand; it was a very hard time. Within a very short time, when a very large number of students come to you, the stress was very difficult, and the challenges were many. So, what I suggest from now on is that enough time, at least time not less than six months, has to be planned for preparation, adjustment, and notification [communication]. All notifications must be finished very early. (UO 6)

In sum, as discussed above, there was a high tendency to attribute problems encountered in the management of the new ESSLCE to weaknesses in the pre-planning of resources. Failures in the pre-planning of resources cause difficulties in mobilizing task implementers and, ultimately, lead to undesirable encounters in the accomplishment of the task, such as the inability to substantially achieve intended goals. Accordingly, the poor pre-planning surrounding the first university-based ESSLCE management might have negatively affected the administration, feasibility, and efficiency of the examination as well as the reliability of the students' results.

Coercive measures
Coercion was also identified as a prominent issue identified. Despite the commitment of most of the actors in the implementation of the new examination management, there were few instances of coercive measures (e.g. "At first, those [the invigilators] we recruited were not willing to go to other regions. However, since it was considered as an unprofessional act that results in accountability, they finally went to the areas of their assignment," (REBO 24). The following utterances also present a good example of a coercive measure:

Convincing was not that much; it was done forcibly. No one was there to decide the cost on oneself, or we can say there were both convincing and forcing. Since this is business,

they [private transporters] could not work freely. Because we were afraid of being unsuccessful, we forced them to work; … otherwise, they would be also out of the market after the completion of this task. Some of them were convinced but the others were not. Therefore, we can say we used different approaches: partial payment, partial convincing and partial compulsion. Out of four trips, we paid only for two trips; we convinced others and forced the rest as they had to serve because they were citizens. (REBO 28)

REBO 28 and REBO 24 above implied that coercion was used as a last option, an option when attempts to influence people positively failed. These participants also reported that this measure helped to achieve the intended immediate goal. However, it is possible to argue that the coerced groups could have provided better services had they participated in the tasks voluntarily. The coercive measures could have been allied with implicit, if not explicit, resistance and reduced quality of service.

Pressures on teachers

The newly implemented examination management somewhat triggered tendencies to becoming educationally self-reliant among students in lower grades. This, thus, resulted in the demand for better instruction among students, at least in some contexts. This in turn created pressures on teachers, particularly, on less hard-working and less responsible teachers. Parents and the community also began to hold such teachers accountable for failures to properly educate children. This is a source of social pressure against these teachers. The pressure coming from students is the focus of the following quote:

> … The indicators of this change are: students attend classes regularly, ask teachers to arrange tutorial classes at weekends, do worksheets, and compel them to provide summary notes. Students also report to the school directors on the teachers, who are not teaching properly; they also insist that this kind of teachers be changed. (REBO 28)

The following transcript emphasizes the phenomenon indicated in the above one, i.e. the fact that the situation is creating pressures on less responsible teachers. It explains the pressure that is coming from parents and the community triggered by the new ESSLCE management:

> In addition, the community is also creating pressure on the teachers, who are not responsible for their tasks. This is because one of the reasons for the failure of the students is the lack of teachers' follow-up. In addition, the community started to urge the school board and parents' committee to actively supervise teachers. The students inform their parents of the way the teachers teach them, and if the teachers are not performing their tasks properly, those parents convince community representatives in the school to solve the problem before it becomes a reason for the failure of students. (REBO 28)

Overall, there appears to be a growing demand for quality education among students, parents and communities after the first university-based ESSLCE management, which signaled a high possibility of reducing examination malpractices. This was reported as triggering some pressure on less hard-working and less responsible teachers. However, the data analyzed above to glean this fact were obtained only from education bureau officials. Counter-balancing them with data from students, teachers, school leaders, parents, community representatives, and lower-level education bureau officials would make the findings stronger and sounder. Analysis of school reports and other relevant records would also further strengthen the evidence about consequential pressures on teachers.

DISCUSSION

The commitment of the concerned actors during the new ESSLCE management was found to be relatively commendable, and in effect, responsibilities were discharged comparatively efficiently. Noteworthy accomplishments were recorded due to concerted professional and public commitments. This commitment is vital to achieve success in examination management (Siahaan, et al., 2020), but the study participants expressed grave concerns over the deteriorated quality of education. They believed that serious measures, including the control of exam stealing and cheating, should be taken. A related prominent issue is, thus, the need for research-based decisions. Concerns over budget and payment, claims of differential treatments, characterization of a single method (the new ESSLCE management to ensure quality education) as deficient, the role of context-driven solutions to mitigate

pressing problems, attribution of setbacks to pitfalls in pre-planning and preparation, coercive measures, and consequential pressures on teachers were also prominent issues associated with the first university-based ESSLCE management.

The participants' deep concerns over the deteriorated quality of education that calls for immediate viable solutions a legitimate ones (e.g. Tekeste, 2006). Secondly, concerns over budget and payment, claims of differential treatments, characterization of a single method as deficient, attribution of setbacks to weaknesses in pre-planning and preparation, and views about coercive measures, which the study participants emphasized, imply that the first university-based ESSLCE management attracted stakeholders' attention and yielded various discourses. This is in tandem with the fact that high-stakes SATs are the focus of public attention, critical discussion, and intense debates in the US (Linn & Gronlund, 2009). On the other hand, the prominent issues of context-driven solutions and consequential pressures on some teachers can be useful public resources if they are properly gauged and utilized.

The preceding paragraph illustrates that there were expectations, concerns, counter-discourses, and contentions linked with the first university-based ESSLCE management, despite notable commitments and concerted efforts. High-stakes initiatives, such as the new ESSLCE management, can attract public attention, raise concerns, and generate various discourses. For instance, in the USA, SATs are the issue of heated discussions, debates, and serious concerns regarding their qualities to serve the various functions they are meant for (Miller, Linn & Gronlund, 2009). Therefore, utmost caution should be taken in the management of huge SATs, including the ESSLCE, so that quality evidence can be generated for viable decision-making (Demir & Keleş, 2021). This view is related to the notion of educational assessment that is captured in Kellaghan and Vincent's (2020) work, which stresses the key role public examinations play in facilitating various level decisions. This also fits in the notion of feedback loop, which is the conceptual framework used in this article.

What is more, besides claims of differential treatments, a high tendency to attribute problems encountered in the management of the new ESSLCE to pitfalls in pre-examination planning was found. The claims of partial treatments, allied with other similar undesirable encounters, in addition to hampering students' emotions and results, can cause unwanted social media consumption and politicization. On the other hand, weaknesses in the pre-planning of resources (time, logistics, and personnel) can cause challenges in coordinating task implementers and, ultimately, lead to unforeseen consequences in the accomplishment of the task, such as inability to achieve desired goals satisfactorily. Likewise, the poor pre-planning surrounding the first university-based ESSLCE management was likely to have negatively affected the administration, feasibility, and efficiency of the examination as well as the reliability of the students' results (Bifwoli & Marcella, 2020). Therefore, fair treatment of all exam-takers and careful pre-planning should receive maximum attention in the management of high-stakes examinations, including the ESSLCE. Generally, key actors in the field of education can use the prominent issues discussed in this article as feedback to make interventions to improve subsequent ESSLCE management, as posited in the concept of feedback loop.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has shown that some prominent issues were derived from the implementation of the new ESSLCE management. Relatively high commitment, deep concerns over the quality of education, the need for evidence-based decision, claims of differential treatments, complaints over budget and payment, characterization of a single-method approach as deficient, the role of context-driven solutions, attribution of setbacks to poor pre-planning and preparation, coercive measures, and consequential pressures on teachers were the outstanding issues that emerged from the inquiry. These prominent issues have implications that can be used to improve the management of the ESSCLE in the future, which contributes an important share to efforts geared towards improving the quality of education in Ethiopia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Huge national projects, such as a shift in the management of national examinations, should be founded on meticulous planning and fitting prior preparations. Therefore, it is necessary that organizations and institutions involved in the ESSLCE management adhere to this requirement.
- The wider population, implementing groups, students, and parents should be aware and sensitized prior to a shift in the ESSLCE management. Thus, the MoE and the structure downward are expected to undertake awareness-creation activities including orientations, discussions, and dialogues if other new approaches to ESSLCE management are to be introduced.
- Maximum efforts should be made to ensure fair treatment of all exam-takers, in all aspects, in the management of ESSLCEs.
- This study included not all the possible data sources. Thus, further studies, with regorious methods, which utilize data from more sources (e.g. lower-level education bureau officials, teachers, school leaders, parents, community representatives, and individual or group cases) are required.

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