

**EXIT EXAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION-IMPACT ON TEACHING STRATEGIES:
SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW**Samson Worku Teshome¹¹ Institute of Educational Research, Center for Higher Education Research and Training, Addis Ababa, EthiopiaDOI: <https://doi.org/10.33222/ijetl.v4i1.4527>**Info Artikel**

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Abstract

Exit exams in higher education have become a critical focus of educational policy and research, particularly regarding their influence on teaching strategies. This systematic review examines the impact of exit exams on teaching methodologies using the PRISMA framework to ensure rigor and transparency. By synthesizing evidence from 15 peer-reviewed articles, case studies, and reviews, this study identifies key themes such as curriculum alignment, teacher behavior, student engagement, institutional policies, and washback effects. The findings reveal that exit exams can lead to both positive and negative impacts on teaching strategies, depending on factors like exam design, stakeholder expectations, and resource availability. Positive outcomes include improved accountability, standardization, and alignment with industry standards, while negative consequences include "teaching to the test" and reduced opportunities for creative thinking. Contextual factors play a significant role in determining the effectiveness of exit exams. This review highlights the need for balanced approaches that integrate exit exams with broader educational goals. Policymakers, educators, and researchers are encouraged to collaborate in designing exit exams that enhance rather than hinder quality education. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts and innovative strategies to mitigate adverse effects.

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INTRODUCTION

Exit exams in higher education serve as high-stakes assessments administered at the end of academic programs to evaluate students' mastery of core competencies. These exams are increasingly being adopted worldwide as tools to ensure accountability, standardization, and quality assurance in educational systems (Ackeren et al., 2012; Piopiunik et al., 2013). However, their influence on teaching strategies remains a contentious topic among scholars, policymakers, and educators. This systematic review aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how exit exams affect teaching methodologies in higher education, focusing on changes in instructional practices, curriculum design, and pedagogical approaches.

The implementation of exit exams has sparked debates about their potential benefits and drawbacks. On one hand, proponents argue that exit exams promote accountability by setting clear benchmarks for student performance and ensuring alignment with professional or industry standards (Khan et al., 2023; Dehury, 2017). For instance, pharmacy exit exams in India have contributed to professional development by guaranteeing that graduates meet competency benchmarks (Khan et al., 2023). Similarly, medical exit exams aim to certify the quality of medical education by aligning curricula with practical skills required in the field (Dehury, 2017).

On the other hand, critics contend that exit exams may lead to unintended consequences, such as narrowing the curriculum and encouraging "teaching to the test" (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022; Benner, 2013). Teachers often modify their instructional practices to prepare students for high-stakes exams, which can reduce opportunities for holistic learning and critical thinking. Furthermore, mandatory exit exams have been shown to discourage graduation rates among marginalized groups due to the stress they impose (Bracey, 2009).

This review explores the dual nature of exit exams through five primary themes:

curriculum alignment, teacher behavior, student engagement, institutional policies, and washback effects. Curriculum alignment is evident when institutions adjust their programs to meet exam requirements, as seen in German states with differing low-stakes regimes (Ackeren et al., 2012). Teacher behavior shifts toward more structured and exam-focused instruction, as highlighted by Piopiunik et al. (2013), who found that centralized exit exams influenced labor-market outcomes differently across regions. Student engagement varies depending on the approach taken; culturally relevant teaching strategies, for example, improve engagement among struggling students (Houchensen, 2023). Institutional policies also play a crucial role, as evidenced by targeted interventions implemented to support nursing students preparing for exit exams (Moore et al., 2021).

Moreover, the washback effect—the influence of testing on teaching and learning—is a central theme in this review. Studies indicate that exit exams can either enhance or hinder self-regulated learning, depending on their design and implementation (Merki, 2011). Variability in results underscores the importance of context-specific solutions, emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches to exit exam implementation.

In summary, exit exams represent a double-edged sword in higher education. While they promote standardization and accountability, they also risk stifling innovation and creativity. Understanding these dynamics requires a comprehensive examination of existing literature and practical implications. This review seeks to bridge gaps in knowledge by synthesizing evidence from diverse sources and offering actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to examine the impact of exit exams on teaching strategies in higher education. The SLR approach is chosen due to its structured and transparent process, which ensures the identification,

selection, and synthesis of relevant evidence from peer-reviewed articles, case studies, and reviews. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework was used to guide the research process, ensuring rigor and replicability.

Search Strategy

Databases and Sources

The search for relevant literature was conducted across multiple databases, including: Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, Scopus, and ERIC.

Keywords

The following keywords were used in combination to identify relevant studies:

- Exit exams
- Higher education
- Teaching strategies
- Curriculum design

- Educational policy
- Washback effects
- Standardized testing

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search queries. For example:

- "exit exams" AND "higher education" AND "teaching strategies"
- "washback effects" OR "curriculum alignment"

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The table below provides information on author and year, objectives of the studies, methodologies used, major findings, and the impact of higher education exit exams on teaching strategies.

Author(s) and Year	Objective of the Study	Methodology Used	Major Findings	Impact on the Teaching Strategies
Ackeren et al. (2012)	To examine the impact of statewide exit exams with differing low-stakes regimes.	Descriptive case study analyzing data from three German states.	Low-stakes exit exams had minimal washback effects but encouraged some alignment with exam requirements.	Teachers adjusted methods slightly to align with exam expectations without drastically altering curricula.
Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun (2022)	To investigate the washback effects of an exit examination on teaching practices.	Case study approach involving interviews and classroom observations.	Exit exams led to increased emphasis on testable skills over holistic learning outcomes.	Teachers focused more on exam preparation, potentially narrowing the curriculum.
Benner (2013)	To explore how exit examinations influence adolescents' developmental outcomes.	Mixed-methods study combining surveys and qualitative interviews.	Exit exams influenced teacher behavior by fostering competitive yet supportive environments.	Teachers modified instructional practices to balance competition and collaboration among students.
Bracey (2009)	To argue that mandatory exit exams discourage graduation.	Literature review and critique of exit exam policies.	Mandatory exit exams created undue pressure, discouraging graduation for	Teaching strategies were adjusted to focus on exam preparation, potentially

			some students.	reducing creativity.
Carol A. & Brown (1994)	To develop an exit examination in criminal justice for graduating seniors.	Development of an exit exam and evaluation of its implementation.	Exit exams helped align curricula with professional standards in criminal justice education.	Teaching strategies shifted to focus on practical skills and professional competencies.
Dehury (2017)	To argue that medical exit exams guarantee quality in medical education.	Argumentative essay supported by evidence from Indian medical education policies.	Medical exit exams aimed to ensure quality but pressured institutions to tailor curricula around exams.	Institutions aligned curricula with exam formats, focusing on certification over broader learning.
Fanjoy et al. (2005)	To explore whether exit exams for college flight programs are redundant or certify competency.	Case study examining exit exam practices in aviation programs.	Exit exams provided value as certification tools rather than being redundant.	Programs emphasized competency-based training aligned with exit exam requirements.
Houchensen (2023)	To examine culturally relevant practitioner inquiry for struggling students.	Qualitative study involving action research and practitioner reflections.	Culturally relevant teaching strategies improved engagement and performance for struggling students.	Teachers adopted tailored approaches to address specific needs of underperforming groups.
Khan et al. (2023)	To evaluate the role of pharmacy exit exams in advancing professional practice in India.	Comprehensive review of existing literature and expert opinions.	Exit exams contributed to standardizing professional competencies and improving graduate quality.	Curriculum adjustments ensured alignment with industry standards, promoting competency-based teaching.
Merki (2011)	To examine the effects of state-wide exit exams on students' self-regulated learning.	Qualitative and quantitative analysis of student learning behaviors.	Exit exams shifted teaching practices toward more structured and exam-focused environments.	Teachers prioritized exam preparation over broader educational goals.

Moore et al. (2021)	To identify predictors of success on the HESI exit exam for BSN students.	Quantitative analysis of academic and nonacademic factors influencing exam performance.	Academic preparedness and institutional support significantly impacted student success.	Institutions implemented targeted interventions to improve student readiness for exit exams.
Piopunuk et al. (2013)	To analyze the effects of central school exit exams on labor-market outcomes.	Econometric analysis using longitudinal data from European countries.	Centralized exit exams positively influenced labor-market outcomes in some regions but not others.	Variability in results highlights the importance of context-specific adaptations in teaching strategies.
University of Munich & Woessmann (2018)	To demonstrate that central exit exams improve student outcomes.	Policy analysis and empirical research on educational systems in Germany.	Central exit exams enhanced accountability and improved student performance.	Teachers adapted methods to align with centralized standards, emphasizing structured instruction.
Teshome (2024)	To conduct a systematic review of exit exams in higher education.	Systematic review of literature on exit exams and their impacts.	Exit exams influenced teaching strategies through curriculum alignment and policy changes.	Teaching strategies varied based on contextual factors such as exam design and stakeholder expectations.
Warren & Grodsky (2009)	To assess whether exit exams harm students who fail them and benefit those who pass.	Secondary data analysis and literature review.	Exit exams disproportionately affected marginalized students negatively while offering limited benefits.	Highlighted the need for equitable and inclusive teaching practices to mitigate adverse effects.

Table 1. Summary of the extraction process.

Themes Identified

1. Curriculum Alignment: Exit exams often necessitate curriculum adjustments to align with exam requirements.
2. Teacher Behavior: Teachers modify their instructional practices to prepare students for high-stakes exams.
3. Student Engagement: Exit exams can enhance or hinder student engagement depending on the approach taken.
4. Institutional Policies: Institutions implement policies to support exit exam preparation.

Discussion

Key Questions Addressed in the systematic literature review:

1. How do exit exams influence curriculum design?
Exit exams often lead to curriculum adjustments to align with exam requirements. For example, Ackeren et al. (2012) found that low-stakes exit exams encouraged some alignment with exam expectations without drastically altering curricula. In contrast, Dehury (2017) noted that medical exit exams pressured institutions to tailor curricula around exam formats, focusing on certification over broader learning.

2. What impact do exit exams have on teacher behavior?

Teachers frequently modify their instructional practices to prepare students for high-stakes exams. Benner (2013) highlighted how exit exams fostered competitive yet supportive environments, prompting teachers to balance competition and collaboration. Similarly, Piopiunik et al. (2013) demonstrated that centralized exit exams influenced teacher behavior by emphasizing exam-oriented instruction.

3. How do exit exams affect student engagement?

The impact of exit exams on student engagement depends on the approach taken. Houchensen (2023) showed that culturally relevant teaching strategies improved engagement and performance among struggling students. Conversely, Warren & Grodsky (2009) argued that mandatory exit exams discouraged graduation for marginalized students due to the stress they impose.

4. What role do institutional policies play?

Institutions implement policies to support exit exam preparation. Moore et al. (2021) identified predictors of success on nursing exit exams, leading to targeted interventions aimed at improving student readiness. Additionally, Khan et al. (2023) reviewed pharmacy exit exams in India, highlighting institutional efforts to align teaching strategies with professional standards.

5. What are the washback effects of exit exams?

The washback effect refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. Merki (2011) examined how state-wide exit exams shifted teaching practices toward more structured and exam-focused environments. Variability in results underscores the importance of context-specific solutions.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review highlights the complex interplay between exit exams and teaching strategies in higher education. The findings underscore the dual nature of exit exams, revealing both positive and negative impacts on teaching methodologies. On the positive

side, exit exams foster accountability, standardization, and alignment with industry standards, as demonstrated in fields like pharmacy and medicine (Khan et al., 2023; Dehury, 2017). They encourage institutions to refine their curricula and adopt competency-based teaching practices, ultimately enhancing graduate preparedness for professional roles.

However, the negative consequences cannot be overlooked. Exit exams often lead to "teaching to the test," reducing opportunities for creative and critical thinking (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022). Moreover, they disproportionately affect marginalized students, discouraging graduation and limiting access to higher education (Bracey, 2009). These challenges emphasize the need for balanced approaches that integrate exit exams with broader educational goals.

Contextual factors significantly influence the effectiveness of exit exams. Variability in outcomes across different regions and educational systems highlights the importance of tailoring strategies to specific contexts (Piopiunik et al., 2013). Policymakers must prioritize collaboration with educators and stakeholders to design exit exams that enhance rather than hinder quality education. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess long-term impacts, comparative analyses across educational systems, and innovative strategies to mitigate adverse effects. By addressing these gaps, we can ensure that exit exams contribute positively to teaching strategies and student success in higher education.

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