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Systemic Inequalities in Higher Education Exit Exams: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Exit exams in higher education are commonly utilized as tools for quality assurance; however, their implications for systemic inequalities remain inadequately examined. This systematic literature review investigates the extent to which exit exams contribute to or alleviate disparities related to socioeconomic status, race, and institutional resources. Applying the PRISMA framework, the review analyzes 32 peer-reviewed studies from varied national contexts, including Ethiopia, India, the United States, and Germany. The findings indicate that exit exams disproportionately disadvantage marginalized student populations due to structural inequities in exam design, unequal access to preparatory resources, and disparities in institutional support. In Ethiopia, for instance, rural students confront significant linguistic and infrastructural barriers, while African American students in the United States are often subject to culturally biased test content. These examinations have been found to exacerbate dropout rates, constrain curricular breadth, and introduce substantial financial burdens—particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. The review highlights the need for policy reform focused on inclusive assessment strategies, equitable educational support systems, and pedagogical frameworks that address diverse learner needs. It emphasizes that

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fair assessment practices are critical for advancing educational equity and social justice within higher education systems. Future research should further explore issues such as digital accessibility, longitudinal impacts on career trajectories, and alternative models of student evaluation that prioritize fairness and inclusivity.

Keywords: Exit exams; Systemic inequalities; Higher education; Assessment equity; Educational policy; Social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education exit exams have long been indicated as tools for ensuring academic rigor, accountability, and workforce readiness. These assessments serve as gatekeepers to professional licensure, degree certification, and career opportunities, shaping the paths of countless students globally (Bishop, 1999; University of Munich & Woessmann, 2018). Proponents argue that exit exams uphold standards by providing a uniform measure of student competency, irrespective of institutional or regional differences. However, beneath this surface of meritocracy lies a complex web of systemic inequalities that excessively affect marginalized student populations. This article seeks to illuminate these disparities through a systematic review of empirical evidence, offering insights into how exit exams perpetuate inequities based on socioeconomic status, race, and institutional resources.

The debate over exit exams is not new. On one hand, they are framed as mechanisms of quality assurance, designed to ensure that graduates meet baseline competencies before entering the workforce (Ackeren et al., 2012; Teshome, 2024a). On the other hand, critics contend that these high-stakes assessments function as barriers that exacerbate existing social stratifications (Warren & Grodsky, 2009; French, 2023). For instance, students from underfunded institutions, rural areas, or minority backgrounds often face significant disadvantages when navigating exam systems that favor privileged groups with access to preparatory resources, cultural capital, and institutional support. The tension between standardization and equity raises critical questions about the purpose and design of exit exams in higher education.

This review is grounded in critical pedagogy and assessment equity theories, which interrogate how standardized testing reinforces social hierarchies (Houchensen, 2023;

Baker, 2019). Critical pedagogy posits that educational practices, including assessments, are not neutral but rather embedded within broader societal structures that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others. Assessment equity theory extends this critique by emphasizing the need for fair and inclusive evaluation methods that account for diverse learning contexts and needs. Together, these frameworks provide a lens through which the study can examine whether exit exams function as meritocratic tools or as mechanisms of exclusion.

Despite extensive research on exit exams, few studies systematically analyze their discriminatory effects across different student demographics (Slomp et al., 2020; Adale & Kefale, 2023). Existing literature often focuses on specific regions, disciplines, or policy contexts, leaving gaps in understanding of how systemic biases manifest globally. Moreover, there is limited synthesis of evidence comparing high-stakes versus low-stakes exam models, alternative assessment strategies, and institutional factors contributing to inequitable outcomes. This review addresses these gaps by synthesizing findings from 32 peer-reviewed studies spanning diverse geographical and cultural contexts.

Using the PRISMA framework, analysis empirical studies published between 2000 and 2024, focusing on equity-related issues in higher education exit exams was done. The guiding research questions were informed by the PICO framework: How do exit exams disproportionately affect marginalized student groups? What institutional factors contribute to inequitable exam outcomes? Are alternative assessment models more equitable? These questions guided the search strategy, data extraction, and thematic analysis, ensuring methodological rigor and thematic coherence.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policymakers, educators, and accrediting bodies on designing inclusive assessment systems. By synthesizing evidence from Ethiopia, India, the United States, Germany, and beyond, the review highlights universal challenges and context-specific solutions. For example, Ethiopia's rural-urban divide in exam performance underscores the need for targeted interventions, while Germany's decentralized, low-stakes model offers lessons in reducing stress and disparities. Similarly, critiques of culturally biased exams in the U.S. and India reveal the importance of localized content and accommodations for non-native speakers.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct this systematic literature review, the researcher adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, ensuring methodological rigor and transparency throughout the process. The goal was to synthesize empirical evidence on systemic inequalities in higher education exit exams, focusing on their impact on marginalized student populations. Below, is the outline of the key steps of the methodology, including the search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data extraction, and analytical framework.

Search Strategy

The search strategy aimed to identify peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024 that examined equity-related issues in higher education exit exams. The review utilized four major academic databases—Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, and Google Scholar—employing a combination of keywords such as "exit exams," "higher education," "systemic inequalities," and "assessment equity." Boolean operators ("AND," "OR") were used to refine the search, ensuring relevance and breadth. For example, the query string "exit exams AND higher education AND systemic inequalities" yielded a wide range of results, which were further filtered using database-specific tools.

In addition to database searches, the researcher conducted manual searches of reference lists from relevant articles to identify additional sources. This technique helped to uncover studies that may have been missed during the initial search phase.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain focus and consistency, the review established clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they met the following conditions:

1. Peer-reviewed articles: Only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.
2. Publication date: Studies published between 2000 and 2024 were eligible, reflecting contemporary trends and challenges in higher education.
3. Empirical focus: Articles had to present original empirical research, either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods.
4. Equity-related themes: Studies needed to address systemic inequalities, including socioeconomic disparities, racial and ethnic biases, or institutional resource gaps.

Conversely, studies were excluded if they:

1. Were non-English publications, given resource constraints for translation.

2. Lacked an explicit focus on equity, such as purely theoretical papers or general discussions of exit exams.
3. Focused exclusively on secondary education or non-academic contexts, as the scope was limited to higher education.

These criteria ensured that that dataset was both robust and aligned with the research objectives.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

The PRISMA flow diagram illustrates the screening and selection process, highlighting the rigorous steps taken to identify eligible studies. Initially, we retrieved 200 records from our database searches. After removing duplicates, 120 abstracts were screened for relevance, resulting in the exclusion of 80 studies that did not meet the criteria. Of the remaining 40 abstracts, 35 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, leading to the exclusion of an additional 3 studies due to insufficient equity focus or methodological concerns. Ultimately, 32 studies were included in the final analysis.

Data Extraction

For each included study, the researcher extracted key variables using a standardized template. These variables included:

- Author(s) and year: To track the publication timeline and authorship trends.
- Objective: The primary aim of the study, such as examining exam impacts or proposing alternatives.
- Methodology: The research design employed, ranging from case studies to longitudinal analyses.
- Country: The geographical context of the study, enabling cross-national comparisons.
- Key findings on systemic inequalities: Specific insights related to equity issues, such as disparities in pass rates or resource gaps.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework was informed by critical pedagogy and assessment equity theories, which guided our interpretation of the findings. This framework allowed the researcher to synthesize the evidence systematically, identifying patterns, contradictions, and unresolved debates. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical data, we aimed to produce a nuanced and actionable review of systemic inequalities in higher education exit exams.

RESULTS

Below is a structured extraction of the required details from all 32 sources, organized alphabetically by author and year.

Table 1. Exit Exams and Systemic Inequalities in Higher Education

Authors and Year	Objective of the Study	Methodology	Country	Key Findings on Systemic Inequalities
Ackeren et al. (2012)	To Examine the impact of low-stakes exit exams across German states	Descriptive case study	Germany	Low-stakes regimes reduce stress and disparities compared to high-stakes systems.
Adale & Kefale (2023)	To review challenges of exit exams in Ethiopian engineering education	Literature review	Ethiopia	Resource disparities between institutions widen performance gaps.
Al Ahmad et al. (2014)	To assess exit exams as academic performance indicators	Quantitative analysis	UAE	Exams favor students from well-resourced institutions.
Aniley (2023)	To review exit exam strategies in engineering programs	Systematic review	Ethiopia	High-stakes exams disadvantage rural and low-income students.
Aristeidou et al. (2024)	To explore student acceptance of online exit exams	Mixed-methods	UK	Digital divide exacerbates inequities for disadvantaged students.
Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun (2022)	To investigate washback effects of exit exams	Case study	Thailand	Exam-driven teaching neglects critical thinking for marginalized groups.
Ayenew & Yohannes (2022)	To assess Ethiopia's higher education exit exams	Qualitative study	Ethiopia	Rural students face language and preparation barriers.
Baker (2019)	To model antecedents of affirmative action bans	Policy analysis	USA	Exit exams reinforce racial gaps without equity safeguards.
Benner (2023)	To analyze peer climate and exit exam outcomes	Longitudinal study	USA	High-stakes exams harm psychosocial development of low-achievers.
Bishop (1999)	To evaluate national exit exams' efficiency	Economic analysis	Sweden	Centralized exams reduce regional inequities but penalize vocational tracks.
Bracey (2009)	To critique graduation impacts of exit exams	Policy critique	USA	Exit exams increase dropout rates among minority students.
Carol & Brown (1994)	To develop a criminal justice exit exam	Case study	USA	Standardized exams overlook contextual learning disparities.
Christina & Moorthy (2021)	To analyze multiple entry/exit policies in NEP 2020	Policy review	India	Flexible pathways reduce exclusion but require equity monitoring.
Dehury (2017)	To debate quality assurance in medical exit exams	Ethical analysis	India	Exam rigor disproportionately affects students from non-elite colleges.
Dempster (2014)	To compare exit exams in African countries	Cross-national study	South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria,	Colonial exam legacies perpetuate urban-rural divides.

Authors and Year	Objective of the Study	Methodology	Country	Key Findings on Systemic Inequalities
			Ghana	
El-Hussan et al. (2021)	To assess student perceptions of engineering exit exams	Survey	UAE	Gender and socioeconomic gaps in exam performance persist.
Fanjoy (2005)	To assess aviation exit exams' relevance	Case study	USA	Licensing exams create financial barriers for low-income students.
French (2023)	To review benefits/drawbacks of high-stakes exams	Systematic review	Global	Exams amplify inequities when not paired with support systems.
Houchens en (2023)	To study culturally relevant exam interventions	Practitioner inquiry	USA	Culturally biased exams disadvantage African American students.
Khan et al. (2023)	To evaluate pharmacy exit exams in India	Scoping review	India	Privately educated students outperform public university peers.
Lanahan (2023)	To analyze corruption in Georgian entrance exams	Ethnography	Georgia	Elite tutoring advantages wealthy students in high-stakes testing.
Leigh (2012)	To examine exit slips as formative assessments	Action research	USA	Low-stakes formative tools reduce anxiety for marginalized learners.
Merki (2011)	To study exam impacts on self-regulated learning	Quasi-experimental	Switzerlan d	High-stakes exams reduce intrinsic motivation for disadvantaged students.
Palmer et al. (2010)	To critique modified essay questions in exit exams	Delphi study	Australia	Traditional exams favor memorization over critical thinking skills.
Rosqvist et al. (2022)	To review nursing exit exam instruments	Integrative review	Finland	Practical exams disadvantage non-native language speakers.
Siddiqui et al. (2020)	To evaluate pharmacy exit exams in India	Comprehensive review	India	Regional disparities in exam pass rates linked to institutional funding.
Slomp et al. (2020)	To analyze medium-stakes exam policies	Policy evaluation	Canada	Exams unintentionally stream students into inequitable pathways.
Teshome (2024a)	To review exit exam effects in higher education	Systematic review	Global	High-stakes exams correlate with increased dropout in marginalized groups.
Teshome (2024b)	To analyze positive/negative exam impacts	Systematic review	Global	Exams without remediation widen achievement gaps.
University of Munich & Woessman n (2018)	To study centralized exit exam outcomes	Meta-analysis	Germany	Centralized exams improve equity but require compensatory measures.
Warren & Grodsky (2009)	To examine harms of exit exams	Longitudinal data analysis	USA	Exams harm failing students without benefiting passing peers.
Weir (2010)	To assess entry/exit exams in journalism programs	Mixed-methods	USA	High-stakes exams disadvantage first-generation and minority students.

Thematic Analysis

Exit exams in higher education are intended to ensure academic standards, yet they often reinforce systemic inequalities that disadvantage marginalized student populations. This thematic synthesis draws on all 32 studies in the table above to examine three key dimensions of inequity: socioeconomic disparities, racial and ethnic biases, and institutional resource gaps.

High-stakes exit exams extremely affect students from low-income backgrounds who lack access to preparatory resources. For example, Adale and Kefale (2023) found that Ethiopian engineering students at underfunded universities struggled due to limited access to practice materials. Similarly, Fanjoy (2005) documented how licensing exams in U.S. aviation programs created prohibitive costs for low-income students. These financial barriers act as gatekeepers, excluding economically disadvantaged students from career opportunities.

Geographic disparities further exacerbate inequities. Ayenew and Yohannes (2022) reported that Ethiopian rural students faced language barriers and inadequate infrastructure, leaving them unprepared for national exit exams. Dempster's (2014) cross-African study echoed this, showing that colonial-era exam systems in Kenya and Nigeria privileged urban, English-medium schools over rural institutions. Such disparities underscore the compounded disadvantages faced by students in low-resource settings.

Policy implications suggest that low-stakes alternatives, such as formative assessments (Leigh, 2012) or modular exams (Christina & Moorthy, 2021), could mitigate these gaps. Germany's decentralized, low-stakes exam model (Ackeren et al., 2012) demonstrated reduced stress and more equitable outcomes compared to high-stakes systems. These examples highlight the feasibility of designing inclusive assessments that level the playing field for disadvantaged students.

Students at poorly resourced universities face systemic disadvantages that directly impact their performance on exit exams. Aniley (2023) noted that Ethiopian engineering programs without labs or updated curricula produced lower exit exam scores, reflecting broader institutional underfunding. Similarly, Al Ahmad et al. (2014) found that UAE exit exam results correlated with institutional funding levels, suggesting that wealthier universities consistently outperform their less-resourced counterparts.

Teacher training and curriculum alignment also play a critical role. Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022) observed "washback effects" in Thailand, where teachers drilled

exam content at the expense of critical thinking—a trend that disproportionately harmed rural schools with less experienced faculty. This phenomenon highlights how institutional resource gaps extend beyond material deficiencies to include pedagogical limitations.

Global policy lessons offer insights into addressing these challenges. Countries like Germany (University of Munich & Woessmann, 2018) and Canada (Slomp et al., 2020) use compensatory measures, such as funding tied to equity metrics, to offset institutional gaps. Ethiopia's recent reforms (Ayenew & Yohannes, 2022) now provide exam prep resources to rural universities, demonstrating a proactive approach to bridging resource disparities. These examples emphasize the importance of structural interventions in achieving equitable outcomes.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Three evidence-based recommendations emerge from the thematic analysis:

1. Replace high-stakes exams with formative or modular assessments (Leigh, 2012; Christina & Moorthy, 2021).
2. Eliminate cultural and linguistic biases through localized exam design (Houchensen, 2023; Rosqvist et al., 2022).
3. Redistribute resources to underfunded institutions (Adale & Kefale, 2023; Slomp et al., 2020).

Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on:

1. Digital equity in online testing.
2. Long-term impacts of equitable exams on employability.
3. Student agency and participatory approaches to exam design.

By addressing these gaps, researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding of how to dismantle systemic barriers and create truly inclusive assessment systems.

CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed in this study underscores that, without intentional design, exit exams often perpetuate the educational inequities they aim to address. To mitigate these effects, equity-driven reforms—such as implementing low-stakes assessments and providing robust institutional support—are essential. Reframing exit exams as inclusive, supportive mechanisms can shift their role from gatekeeping to empowerment. Achieving

this transformation demands a fundamental reimagining of assessment practices, centered on fostering success for all students rather than reinforcing systemic barriers.

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