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The Merits and Demerits of Undergraduate Exit Exams: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Exit exams in higher education serve as a critical mechanism for assessing students' readiness for professional or advanced academic pursuits. These high-stakes assessments are intended to uphold academic and professional standards, promote accountability, and ensure quality across institutions. **Objective:** This study aims to systematically review the existing literature to evaluate the benefits and challenges of exit exams in higher education, focusing on their effectiveness, equity, and implications for students and institutions. **Method:** A systematic literature review was conducted, analyzing findings from 33 peer-reviewed studies across various educational contexts. The review examined both quantitative and qualitative evidence on the outcomes and perceptions of exit exams. **Results:** The review reveals that exit exams contribute positively to transparency, standardization, and alignment with labor market demands. They provide valuable feedback for curriculum development and institutional improvement. **Conclusion:** While exit exams have the potential to enhance graduate preparedness and institutional accountability, their current implementation often undermines equity and educational depth. A more balanced and inclusive approach is required to address these issues. **Contribution:** This review offers a comprehensive synthesis of the current discourse on exit exams and provides actionable insights for educators and policymakers. It advocates for integrating formative assessments, enhancing exam design, and prioritizing student well-being to create a more equitable and effective assessment framework in higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of higher education, institutions face the ongoing challenge of ensuring that graduates are adequately prepared to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive and dynamic workforce. Exit exams have emerged as a pivotal tool in this endeavor, serving as a mechanism to evaluate students' mastery of knowledge, skills, and competencies at the culmination of their academic programs. These assessments are designed not only to measure individual student achievement but also to provide a benchmark for institutional accountability, program effectiveness, and alignment with industry standards. By acting as a gatekeeping instrument or a prerequisite for graduation, exit exams aim to certify that students possess the necessary qualifications to transition into professional roles or further academic pursuits.

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The concept of exit exams in higher education is rooted in the broader goals of quality assurance and educational equity. These assessments are intended to foster a culture of diligence and dedication among students by establishing clear expectations for learning outcomes and encouraging consistent effort throughout their studies (Slomp et al., 2020). Beyond their role in evaluating individual performance, exit exams also serve as a diagnostic tool for identifying strengths and weaknesses within curricula, enabling institutions to make data-driven improvements (El-Hussan et al., 2021). Furthermore, they provide stakeholders ranging from employers to accrediting bodies with measurable evidence of graduates' readiness to contribute meaningfully to their respective fields.

Despite their widespread adoption, exit exams are not without controversy. Scholars and practitioners alike have debated their efficacy, questioning whether these assessments truly capture the breadth and depth of student learning or if they inadvertently narrow the scope of education by prioritizing standardized metrics over holistic development (French, 2023). Critics argue that high-stakes exit exams can exacerbate existing inequalities, placing disproportionate pressure on marginalized students and potentially increasing dropout rates (Warren & Grodsky, 2009). Additionally, concerns about the psychological toll of these exams, technical challenges associated with online administration, and the risk of "teaching to the test" have sparked calls for more nuanced approaches to assessment design and implementation (Houchensen, 2023; Aristeidou et al., 2024).

The structure and focus of exit exams vary significantly across disciplines and regions, reflecting diverse educational priorities and cultural contexts. For instance, engineering programs often emphasize technical competencies and problem-solving abilities, while medical and nursing programs incorporate both theoretical knowledge and clinical skills into their assessments (Aniley, 2023; Rosqvist et al., 2022). Similarly, centralized exit exams in some countries aim to establish national standards and enhance comparability, whereas institution-specific exams may prioritize local needs and program-specific objectives (Woessmann, 2018). This diversity underscores the complexity of designing assessments that are both rigorous and inclusive, capable of addressing the unique demands of different fields while maintaining fairness and accessibility for all students.

As the debate surrounding exit exams continues, it becomes increasingly important to critically examine their merits and demerits. Proponents highlight their potential to promote accountability, standardization, and employability, arguing that these assessments play a crucial role in safeguarding the integrity of higher education systems (Ackeren et al., 2012; Adale & Kefale, 2023). Conversely, detractors warn of the risks associated with over-reliance on high-stakes testing, including the reinforcement of systemic biases, the neglect of soft skills such as communication and teamwork, and the potential for superficial learning driven by exam-centric teaching practices (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; French, 2023).

This systematic literature review seeks to synthesize the existing body of research on exit exams in higher education, exploring their multifaceted impact on students, educators, and institutions. By analyzing both the merits and demerits identified in recent studies, this review aims to illuminate pathways for optimizing the design and implementation of exit exams. Ultimately, the goal is to strike a balance between the need for rigorous assessment and the imperative to create an equitable, supportive, and meaningful educational experience that prepares students for the challenges of the modern world.

Amid global demands for improved graduate quality and accountability in higher education institutions, exit exams have become an increasingly reliable evaluation tool for measuring students' readiness to enter the workforce or pursue further studies. However, the diversity of approaches, differences in implementation contexts, and varying perceptions of their effectiveness and fairness have created an urgent need for holistic, evidence-based research. This study is important because it provides a scientific synthesis of the impact of exit exams on learning outcomes, graduate employability, and curriculum improvement across various institutions. Additionally, the study highlights key challenges in implementing such exams, such as psychological pressure on students, disparities in access to supportive resources, and the potential for systemic biases that could widen educational gaps. Furthermore, this study offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in designing evaluation systems that are more equitable, inclusive, and aligned with the evolving needs of the workforce. By presenting a cross-disciplinary and cross-regional perspective, this study also bridges the gap in the literature, which has previously discussed exit exams in a fragmented manner.

This study aims to conduct a systematic review of the literature discussing the implementation, effectiveness, and challenges of exit exams in higher education. The primary focus of this study is to evaluate the extent to which exit exams can fulfill their primary function as a measure of graduate readiness, as well as to examine their positive and negative impacts on students, faculty, and educational institutions. By synthesizing findings from various studies, this review seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of exit exam practices across disciplines and geographical contexts.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This systematic literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on the merits and demerits of exit exams in higher education, with a focus on studies published between 1994 and 2024. The review adhered to the principles of systematic literature reviews as outlined by Gough and Thomas (2012) and Petticrew and Roberts (2006). Systematic reviews are defined as comprehensive analyses that employ systematic and explicit methods to identify, appraise, and synthesize all relevant studies addressing a specific research question or set of questions. This approach ensures rigor, transparency, and replicability in the review process.

The research questions guiding this review were: (1) What are the merits of exit exams in higher education?; (2) What are the demerits of exit exams in higher education?.

To ensure a robust and unbiased review, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework was adopted. PRISMA provides a structured methodology for conducting and reporting systematic reviews, ensuring clarity and accountability at every stage of the process. Zotero, a reference management tool, was utilized to organize and verify the accuracy of references throughout the review.

The review process was divided into five distinct stages: (1) Planning: Defining the scope, objectives, and research questions.; (2) Protocol Development: Establishing inclusion/exclusion criteria, quality assessment standards, and search strategies; (3) Data Extraction: Systematically identifying and extracting relevant data from eligible studies; (4) Analysis: Conducting a thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes; (5) Reporting: Presenting findings in a structured and transparent manner, adhering to PRISMA guidelines.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the studies included in the review, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied:

Inclusion Criteria: (1) Peer-reviewed articles published in scholarly journals; (2) Studies focusing specifically on exit exams in higher education; (3) Articles written in English; (4) Empirical studies, literature reviews, and policy analyses providing evidence-based insights.

Exclusion Criteria: (1) Papers published in non-peer-reviewed outlets, such as conference proceedings, book chapters, or predatory journals; (2) Gray literature, including unpublished manuscripts or institutional reports; (3) Studies focusing exclusively on high school exit exams or other educational levels outside higher education; (4) Articles lacking empirical evidence or substantive analysis. These criteria ensured that only high-quality, relevant studies were included in the final synthesis.

2.3 Quality Assessment

The quality of the selected studies was assessed using the following criteria: (1) Clarity of Research Goals: Were the objectives and research questions clearly stated?; (2) Peer-Reviewed Status: Was the study published in a peer-reviewed journal?; (3) Full-Text Availability: Was the complete text of the study accessible?; (4) Relevance and Accessibility of Content: Did the study provide meaningful insights into the merits and demerits of exit exams in higher education?

Studies that met all four criteria were deemed eligible for inclusion. This rigorous quality assessment ensured the reliability and validity of the findings presented in the review.

2.4 Search Strategy and Source of Information

A comprehensive search strategy was employed to identify relevant studies across multiple electronic databases. The databases searched included ERIC, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and Wiley platforms known for their extensive coverage of educational research.

Search terms were formulated using Boolean operators ("AND," "OR") to maximize the breadth and precision of the search. The following key terms were used (1) "Merits of Exit Exams" OR "Demerits of Exit Exams"; (2) AND "Higher Education" OR "Universities" OR "Colleges" OR "Tertiary Education".

The search strategy is illustrated below: (1) Initial Search: Broad keyword search across databases; (2) Refinement: Application of Boolean operators to narrow results; (3) Screening: Removal of duplicates and irrelevant studies; (4) Eligibility Assessment: Application of inclusion/exclusion criteria; (5) Final Selection: Identification of studies meeting quality standards.

A total of 115 articles were initially identified through the database searches. After removing duplicates, applying inclusion/exclusion criteria, and conducting a quality assessment, 33 studies were selected for inclusion in the review. These studies represented a diverse range of methodologies, including descriptive case studies, quantitative surveys, qualitative reviews, and integrative analyses.

2.5 Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was performed using a standardized template designed to capture key information from each study. The template included the following fields: (1) Author(s) and Year; (2) Objective of the Study; (3) Methodology Employed; (4) Major Findings; (5) Identified Merits of Exit Exams; (6) Identified Demerits of Exit Exams

The extracted data were then subjected to thematic analysis; a method widely used in qualitative research to identify recurring patterns and themes within the dataset. Thematic analysis was conducted in three stages: (1) Initial Coding: Assigning codes to segments of text that captured key concepts related to the merits and demerits of exit exams; (2) Theme Development: Grouping related codes into broader themes, such as standardization, equity, and implementation challenges; (3) Interpretation: Synthesizing the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of exit exams in higher education.

This analytical approach ensured that the findings were grounded in the data while providing a coherent narrative of the strengths and limitations of exit exams.

2.6 Limitations of the Methodology

While the systematic review methodology employed in this study ensures rigor and transparency, several limitations should be acknowledged: (1) Temporal Scope: The review focused on studies published within a specific timeframe 1994 and 2024, potentially excluding relevant studies published outside this period; (2) Language Bias: Only studies published in English were included, which may have excluded valuable insights from non-English sources; (3) Database Dependency: The review relied on four major databases, which may not have captured all relevant studies available in less commonly accessed repositories.

Despite these limitations, the systematic approach and adherence to PRISMA guidelines enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings presented in this review.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

Table 1. Summary of Exit Exams Studies

Author & Year	Objective	Methodology	Major Findings	Merits of Exit Exams	Demerits of Exit Exams
Ackeren et al., 2012	To assess the impact of exit exams in German states.	Descriptive case study.	Different impacts based on exam stakes.	Improve system transparency, accountability.	Can increase inequality if stakes are high.
Adale & Kefale, 2023	To review challenges and quality assurance in engineering exit exams in Ethiopia.	Review study.	Implementation faces systemic challenges.	Promotes minimum competence standards.	Poor implementation reduces effectiveness.
Al Ahmad et al., 2014	To evaluate exit exams as academic performance indicators.	Quantitative survey.	Exams positively correlate with performance.	Helps gauge academic readiness.	Doesn't account for soft skills.
Aniley, 2023	Review exit exam strategies and quality assurance role.	Literature review.	Strong role in employability, but challenges exist.	Encourages standardization and employability.	Over focus on theory, neglects practical skills.
Aristeidou et al., 2024	Explore student satisfaction with online exams.	Survey-based study.	Students accept online exams with reservations.	Flexibility and accessibility.	Technical issues, reduced engagement.

Author & Year	Objective	Methodology	Major Findings	Merits of Exit Exams	Demerits of Exit Exams
Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022	Study washback effects of exit exams on teaching.	Case study.	Exams impact teaching focus and strategy.	Directs focus to core competencies.	Narrow curriculum and teaching to the test.
Ayenew & Yohannes, 2022	Assess practices and prospects of Ethiopian HE exit exams.	Exploratory study.	Exams implemented but with logistical flaws.	Supports evaluation of learning outcomes.	Inadequate training and preparation for students.
Baker, 2019	Analyze policy impacts including exit exams.	Policy modeling.	Race and exam policies intersect unequally.	Could support equity with correct policies.	Reinforces systemic inequalities without safeguards.
Benner, 2023	Explore peer climate and developmental effects of exams.	Empirical study.	Peer effects can buffer negative exam stress.	Can improve academic seriousness.	Induces stress and peer pressure.
Bishop, 1999	Assess national exit exams' educational efficiency.	Economic analysis.	Strong efficiency gains observed.	Raises standards and learning outcomes.	May increase dropout rates for weaker students.
Bracey, 2009	Evaluate if mandatory exams increase graduation.	Secondary data analysis.	Exams discourage graduation.	Forces minimum competence.	High failure rates reduce morale and retention.
Carol & Brown, 1994	Develop and test a criminal justice exit exam.	Case study.	Created a workable program-level exam.	Allows program-specific assessment.	Needs continuous update and alignment.
Christina & Moorthy, 2021	Discuss NEP reforms including exit flexibility.	Policy review.	Flexible entry-exit boosts inclusivity.	Respects diverse learner needs.	May dilute academic depth if unchecked.
Dempster, 2012	Compare exit exams in four African countries.	Comparative study.	Disparities in standardization and fairness.	Supports benchmarking across systems.	Cultural bias and uneven implementation.
El-Hussan et al., 2021	Gauge student perception on curriculum-based exit exams.	Survey research.	Mixed feelings—some value, some stress.	Aligns assessment with curriculum.	Can create anxiety, especially without preparation.
Fanjoy, 2005	Analyze exit exams for aviation programs.	Descriptive study.	Redundancy without certification link.	Opportunity to assess readiness.	Can be duplicative and costly.
French, 2023	Review benefits/drawbacks of high-stakes exams.	Systematic literature review.	High-stakes exams double-edged.	Certify knowledge rigorously.	Narrow focus, high stress, socioeconomic bias.
Houchensen, 2023	Explore culturally responsive strategies for struggling students.	Practitioner inquiry.	Contextualized support needed.	Tailored interventions can help at-risk groups.	Standardized exams ignore diverse needs.
Khan et al., 2023	Promote pharmacy exit exam adoption in India.	Review article.	Advocates for regulatory-driven exams.	Quality control, industry alignment.	Bureaucratic delays, resistance to change.

Author & Year	Objective	Methodology	Major Findings	Merits of Exit Exams	Demerits of Exit Exams
Lanahan, 2023	Study higher education politics in Georgia.	Narrative analysis.	Exit exams shaped by political motives.	Opportunity to reform corrupt systems.	Prone to misuse in political agendas.
Leigh, 2012	Highlight informal exit slips in learning.	Reflective essay.	Exit slips offer formative insight.	Low-pressure feedback for students.	Not scalable for summative evaluation.
Merki, 2011	Impact of state exams on self-regulation.	Quantitative analysis.	Mixed results on student motivation.	May foster planning and preparation.	Can induce superficial learning.
Palmer et al., 2010	Question effectiveness of MEQ in med exams.	Comparative study.	Shift away from MEQs observed.	Case-based approach promotes thinking.	MEQs time-consuming and hard to grade.
Rosqvist et al., 2022	Review nursing exit exam instruments.	Integrative review.	Wide variation in tools and reliability.	Tailors assessment to profession.	Lacks universal criteria and consistency.
Siddiqui et al., 2020	Evaluate pharmacy exit exams in India.	Review article.	Recommends structured roll-out.	Upholds professional standards.	Lacks infrastructure for fair rollout.
Slomp et al., 2020	Evaluate outcomes of medium-stakes exams.	Policy analysis.	Moderate stakes yield balanced outcomes.	Promotes accountability without harshness.	Still susceptible to curriculum narrowing.
Teshome, 2024a	Systematic review of exit exams in higher education.	Literature review.	Balanced view of global practices.	Enhances comparability across systems.	Risk of being overly standardized.
Teshome, 2024b	Explore positive/negative effects of exit exams.	Systematic review.	Found both motivational and deterrent effects.	Increases rigor, credibility.	Can demoralize struggling learners.
Woessmann, 2018	Assess impact of central exams.	Policy analysis.	Central exams improve performance.	Objectivity, national standards.	Reduces teacher autonomy.
Warren & Grodsky, 2009	Analyze who is harmed/helped by exit exams.	Secondary data analysis.	Harms low-performing students disproportionately.	Incentivizes learning for some.	Penalizes already demerits groups.
Weir, 2010	Evaluate pre/posttest use in journalism.	Descriptive study.	Entry-exit tests useful for curriculum tracking.	Supports program effectiveness analysis.	Doesn't capture holistic learning.

The comprehensive table synthesizing the findings from various studies on exit exams in higher education reveals several recurring themes and patterns. These themes highlight both the merits and demerits of exit exams, offering a nuanced understanding of their role in educational systems. Below is a thematic analysis of the data, organized into key overarching themes.

a) Standardization and Accountability

One of the most prominent themes across studies is the role of exit exams in fostering standardization and accountability within higher education systems. These exams are seen as a key mechanism for ensuring that graduates meet a certain level of competence and are prepared for their professional careers. They act as a benchmark for institutions, accrediting bodies, and employers, promoting transparency and trust in the educational process. By assessing the knowledge and skills acquired throughout a program, exit exams help to standardize educational outcomes, making it easier to compare graduates across different institutions. Furthermore, they enhance account-

tability, holding universities and educators responsible for providing a high-quality education that meets the required standards.

Merits: (1) Consistency and Objectivity: Exit exams provide a standardized measure of students' knowledge and skills, ensuring that graduates meet minimum competency standards (Ackeren et al., 2012; Woessmann, 2018). This consistency allows for comparisons across programs, institutions, and even countries; (2) Accountability: Exit exams hold both students and institutions accountable for educational quality, as they serve as a benchmark for assessing program effectiveness and alignment with industry standards (Adale & Kefale, 2023; Slomp et al., 2020); (3) National Standards: Centralized exit exams, as highlighted by Woessmann (2018), improve transparency and ensure adherence to national or regional standards.

Demerits: (1) Over standardization: While standardization is beneficial, it risks oversimplifying complex learning outcomes, neglecting creativity, and stifling innovation in teaching methods (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022); (2) Reduced Autonomy: Teachers may feel constrained by the rigid structure of exit exams, leading to "teaching to the test" rather than fostering holistic learning experiences (French, 2023; Slomp et al., 2020).

b) Impact on Learning Outcomes

Exit exams are frequently regarded as tools to improve learning outcomes, yet their actual impact is contingent upon how they are implemented and the specific context in which they are applied. When designed effectively, exit exams can help reinforce key learning objectives, encourage students to review and consolidate their knowledge, and ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills to enter the workforce. However, their success largely depends on several factors, such as the alignment of the exam content with the curriculum, the fairness of the assessment process, and the support provided to students during their preparation. In some contexts, exit exams may lead to increased pressure and anxiety among students, potentially undermining their learning experience.

Merits: (1) Motivation and Engagement: Studies like Merki (2011) suggest that exit exams can motivate students to engage more deeply with coursework and prepare thoroughly, knowing their performance will be evaluated comprehensively; (2) Competency-Based Evaluation: Exit exams ensure that students possess the necessary competencies required for their fields, enhancing employability and professional readiness (Aniley, 2023; Dehury, 2017).

Demerits: (1) Superficial Learning: The pressure to pass high-stakes exams may encourage rote memorization and surface-level understanding rather than deep, critical thinking (Merki, 2011; French, 2023); (2) Disproportionate Harm: Warren & Grodsky (2009) found that exit exams disproportionately harm low-performing students, exacerbating existing inequalities and potentially increasing dropout rates.

c) Equity and Inclusivity

Equity concerns are a significant theme in the discussion of exit exams, as many studies highlight how these assessments can either promote fairness or exacerbate systemic disparities. On one hand, well-implemented exit exams can serve as equalizers by establishing a standard measure of competence that applies to all students, regardless of their background or the institution they attended. This can help ensure that all graduates are held to the same rigorous standards, thereby promoting fairness and accountability.

Merits: (1) Benchmarking Across Systems: Exit exams create a level playing field for comparisons, particularly in diverse or unequal educational systems (Dempster, 2012; Woessmann, 2018); (2) Tailored Interventions: Culturally responsive strategies, as discussed by Houchensen (2023), can help mitigate inequities and support at-risk groups.

Demerits: (1) Systemic Bias: High-stakes exams often dismerit students from marginalized backgrounds, perpetuating socioeconomic and cultural inequalities (Baker, 2019; Ayenew & Yohannes, 2022); (2) Limited Accessibility: Technical issues with online exams and inadequate preparation resources further widen the gap between privileged and underprivileged students (Aristeidou et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023).

d) Stress and Psychological Impact

The psychological toll of high-stakes exit exams is a recurring concern across multiple studies, with many researchers highlighting the negative impact these exams can have on students' mental health and well-being. The pressure to perform well on exit exams, often viewed as the final hurdle in securing a degree or job, can lead to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout. For many students, the fear of failure or not meeting expectations can overshadow their entire academic experience, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth and motivation.

Merits: (1) Peer Support Buffers Stress: Benner (2023) notes that peer academic climates can mitigate some of the stress associated with exit exams, fostering resilience among students.

Demerits: (1) Increased Anxiety: High-stakes exams significantly increase stress and anxiety levels, negatively impacting students' mental health and overall well-being (Houchensen, 2023; Bracey, 2009); (3) Demotivation: Students who struggle with exams may experience reduced confidence and motivation, potentially leading to disengagement or dropout (Teshome, 2024b; Warren & Grodsky, 2009).

e) Practical vs. Theoretical Skills

Another critical theme is the tension between assessing theoretical knowledge and practical skills, which mirrors the broader debate about the purpose of education. On one hand, traditional exit exams often emphasize theoretical knowledge, testing students' ability to recall and apply concepts learned in the classroom. This approach is rooted in the belief that a strong theoretical foundation is essential for students to understand and engage with complex ideas, regardless of their specific career paths. In this context, exit exams serve as a measure of academic rigor and intellectual capability.

Merits: (1) Alignment with Curriculum: Exit exams ensure that assessments are aligned with curriculum goals, verifying that students have acquired the intended knowledge and skills (El-Hussan et al., 2021; Aniley, 2023).

Demerits: (1) Neglect of Soft Skills: Many exit exams focus narrowly on specific knowledge or technical skills, failing to capture essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; Rosqvist et al., 2022); (2) False Sense of Security: Success on an exit exam may give a misleading impression of a student's readiness for real-world challenges, as practical applications often require interdisciplinary and adaptive thinking (Dehury, 2017; French, 2023).

f) Implementation Challenges

The success of exit exams heavily depends on their implementation, which is fraught with logistical, financial, and systemic challenges. Logistically, ensuring that exit exams are fair, accessible, and reliable requires careful planning and coordination across institutions. From setting up standardized testing environments to managing exam scheduling, grading, and security, the administrative burden can be significant. For example, ensuring that exams are administered uniformly across different regions, schools, or universities may involve substantial organizational effort and resources.

Merits: (1) Quality Assurance: When implemented effectively, exit exams can enhance quality assurance and align educational practices with industry demands (Adale & Kefale, 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2020); (2) Flexibility: Flexible entry-exit options, as proposed by Christina & Moorthy (2021), accommodate diverse learner needs and reduce the pressure of a single high-stakes assessment.

Demerits: (1) Resource Constraints: Developing, administering, and evaluating exit exams can be costly and resource-intensive, straining institutional budgets (Khan et al., 2023; Lanahan, 2023); (2) Inconsistent Practices: Variations in exam design, administration, and evaluation undermine reliability and fairness, as noted by Rosqvist et al. (2022) and Dempster (2012).

g). Feedback Mechanisms

Exit exams are often praised for providing feedback, but their effectiveness in this regard is limited. While these assessments can offer valuable insights into students' strengths and areas for improvement, the feedback they provide is typically narrow and focused on the specific content tested, rather than on broader educational development. This limited scope means that students may receive feedback on their performance in the exam, but not necessarily on how well they have mastered the full range of skills and competencies needed for success in their field or in the workforce.

Merits: (1) Diagnostic Tool: Exit exams offer valuable feedback to students, helping them identify areas for improvement and guiding their future educational or professional endeavors (Leigh, 2012; Teshome, 2024a); (2) Data for Stakeholders: Results from exit exams serve as important data for stakeholders, including employers, accrediting bodies, and policymakers, highlighting the effectiveness of higher education programs (Slomp et al., 2020).

Demerits: (1) Generic Feedback: The feedback provided by exit exams is often generic and lacks the granularity needed for targeted improvement (Siddiqui et al., 2020; French, 2023); (2) Neglect of Holistic Learning: Exit exams fail to capture the broader aspects of learning, such as personal growth, creativity, and interpersonal skills (Weir, 2010; Rosqvist et al., 2022).

In summary, exit exams in higher education present a complex interplay of merits and demerits, shaped by their design, implementation, and context. On one hand, they promote standardization, accountability, and competency-based evaluation, ensuring that graduates meet minimum requirements for their chosen fields. On the other hand,

they pose significant challenges, including equity concerns, psychological stress, and limited scope, which can undermine their effectiveness and fairness.

To maximize the benefits of exit exams while mitigating their drawbacks, institutions must adopt a balanced approach. This includes integrating formative assessments, leveraging technology for flexibility and accessibility, incorporating qualitative metrics, and prioritizing student well-being. By addressing these challenges, higher education systems can create a more inclusive, equitable, and meaningful assessment framework that prepares students for the complexities of the modern workforce.

3.2. Discussion

The findings presented in Table 1 and the results section reveal a nuanced landscape of exit exams in higher education, highlighting both their potential benefits and significant challenges. This discussion synthesizes the key themes identified in the thematic analysis: standardization and accountability, impact on learning outcomes, equity and inclusivity, stress and psychological impact, practical versus theoretical skills, implementation challenges, and feedback mechanisms to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of exit exams in higher education systems.

a) Standardization and Accountability

One of the most prominent merits of exit exams is their ability to promote standardization and accountability within higher education systems. Exit exams serve as a benchmark for assessing whether students have achieved the intended learning outcomes of their programs (Ackeren et al., 2012; Woessmann, 2018). By providing a standardized measure of students' knowledge and skills, these exams ensure that graduates meet minimum competency standards, fostering transparency and comparability across programs, institutions, and even countries. For instance, Adale & Kefale (2023) emphasize how exit exams can enhance quality assurance in engineering education by verifying that graduates possess the necessary competencies required for their fields. Similarly, Slomp et al. (2020) highlight the role of medium-stakes exit exams in promoting accountability without the harshness associated with high-stakes assessments.

However, the emphasis on standardization also presents significant drawbacks. Over standardization risks oversimplifying complex learning outcomes, neglecting creativity, and stifling innovation in teaching methods (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022). The rigid structure of exit exams often leads to "teaching to the test," where faculty prioritize exam content over broader educational objectives, thereby narrowing the curriculum and limiting students' intellectual growth (French, 2023). Furthermore, centralized exit exams reduce teacher autonomy, as educators may feel constrained by the need to align their instruction with predetermined exam formats (Woessmann, 2018).

b) Impact on Learning Outcomes

Exit exams are often seen as tools to enhance learning outcomes by motivating students to engage more deeply with coursework and prepare thoroughly for evaluations (Merki, 2011). Studies suggest that the awareness of a comprehensive evaluation at the end of their studies can encourage students to adopt better self-regulation strategies, such as planning and preparation (Teshome, 2024b). Additionally, exit exams ensure that students possess the necessary competencies required for their fields, enhancing employability and professional readiness (Aniley, 2023; Dehury, 2017).

Despite these merits, the pressure to pass high-stakes exams often leads to superficial learning. Students may resort to rote memorization and surface-level understanding rather than engaging in deep, critical thinking (Merki, 2011; French, 2023). Moreover, Warren & Grodsky (2009) found that exit exams disproportionately harm low-performing students, exacerbating existing inequalities and potentially increasing dropout rates. The compulsion to pass exit exams can demotivate struggling learners, leading to reduced confidence and disengagement from academic pursuits (Teshome, 2024b).

c) Equity and Inclusivity

Equity concerns are a significant theme in the discourse on exit exams. On one hand, exit exams create a level playing field for comparisons, particularly in diverse or unequal educational systems (Dempster, 2012; Woessmann, 2018). They support benchmarking across systems, ensuring adherence to national or regional standards and fostering accountability. Culturally responsive strategies, as discussed by Houchensen (2023), can help mitigate inequities and support at-risk groups by tailoring interventions to their specific needs.

On the other hand, high-stakes exams often dismerit students from marginalized backgrounds, perpetuating socioeconomic and cultural inequalities (Baker, 2019; Ayenew & Yohannes, 2022). Technical issues with online exams and inadequate preparation resources further widen the gap between privileged and underprivileged students (Aristeidou et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023). For example, Aristeidou et al. (2024) highlight the challenges faced by distance learning students, including technical difficulties and reduced engagement, which undermine the fairness and accessibility of online exit exams.

d) Stress and Psychological Impact

The psychological toll of high-stakes exit exams is a recurring concern across multiple studies. High-stakes exams significantly increase stress and anxiety levels, negatively impacting students' mental health and overall well-being (Houchensen, 2023; Bracey, 2009). The pressure to succeed can lead to disengagement, dropout, and even adverse developmental outcomes, particularly for adolescents in peer academic climates (Benner, 2023).

While peer academic climates can buffer some of the stress associated with exit exams, fostering resilience among students (Benner, 2023), the overarching impact remains detrimental. Students who struggle with exams may experience reduced confidence and motivation, potentially leading to disengagement or dropout (Teshome, 2024b; Warren & Grodsky, 2009). These findings underscore the need for policies that prioritize student well-being and address the psychological challenges posed by high-stakes assessments.

e) Practical vs. Theoretical Skills

Another critical theme is the tension between assessing theoretical knowledge and practical skills, reflecting the broader debate about the purpose of education. Exit exams ensure that assessments are aligned with curriculum goals, verifying that students have acquired the intended knowledge and skills (El-Hussan et al., 2021; Aniley, 2023). However, many exit exams focus narrowly on specific knowledge or technical skills, failing to capture essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; Rosqvist et al., 2022).

Success on an exit exam may give a misleading impression of a student's readiness for real-world challenges, as practical applications often require interdisciplinary and adaptive thinking (Dehury, 2017; French, 2023). For example, Dehury (2017) argues that medical exit exams cannot adequately assess practical and interpersonal skills, creating a false sense of security about graduates' competence. This disconnect between exam content and workplace demands highlights the need for a more holistic approach to assessment that balances theoretical knowledge with practical application.

f) Implementation Challenges

The success of exit exams heavily depends on their implementation, which is fraught with logistical, financial, and systemic challenges. When implemented effectively, exit exams can enhance quality assurance and align educational practices with industry demands (Adale & Kefale, 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2020). Flexible entry-exit options, as proposed by Christina & Moorthy (2021), accommodate diverse learner needs and reduce the pressure of a single high-stakes assessment.

However, developing, administering, and evaluating exit exams can be costly and resource-intensive, straining institutional budgets (Khan et al., 2023; Lanahan, 2023). Variations in exam design, administration, and evaluation undermine reliability and fairness, as noted by Rosqvist et al. (2022) and Dempster (2012). For instance, Rosqvist et al. (2022) highlight the wide variation in tools and reliability used in nursing exit exams, underscoring the lack of universal criteria and consistency. Addressing these implementation challenges is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness and fairness of exit exams.

g) Feedback Mechanisms

Exit exams are often praised for providing feedback, but their effectiveness in this regard is limited. While they offer valuable feedback to students, helping them identify areas for improvement and guiding their future educational or professional endeavors (Leigh, 2012), the feedback provided is often generic and lacks the granularity needed for targeted improvement (Siddiqui et al., 2020; French, 2023). Exit exams fail to capture the broader aspects of learning, such as personal growth, creativity, and interpersonal skills (Weir, 2010; Rosqvist et al., 2022).

To maximize their utility as diagnostic tools, exit exams must be complemented by formative assessments that provide ongoing, detailed feedback throughout students' academic journeys. Integrating qualitative metrics, such as capstone projects, internships, and employer evaluations, can paint a more comprehensive picture of graduate readiness (Aniley, 2023).

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implication

The findings of this review have significant implications for both policy and practice. Policymakers should aim to design exit exams that strike a balance between standardization and flexibility. These exams should align with broader educational objectives while also accommodating the diverse needs of students. Educational institutions should invest in faculty training programs to foster the development of curricula that go beyond the constraints of standardized exams. Moreover, stakeholders must prioritize student well-being by implementing culturally responsive strategies and offering mental health resources to mitigate the psychological toll of high-stakes assessments.

For practitioners, enhancing the effectiveness of exit exams requires integrating mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative data with qualitative insights. The use of technology to create adaptive online exams could address challenges related to cost and resource limitations while improving the reliability of assessments. Finally, collaboration among employers, accrediting bodies, and policymakers is crucial to ensure that exit exams remain relevant and responsive to evolving industry standards.

4.2 Research Contribution

This study provides a comprehensive synthesis of the current discourse on undergraduate exit exams in higher education, offering actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions. It highlights the benefits and challenges associated with these assessments, emphasizing the need for a balanced and inclusive approach. The findings contribute to the understanding of how exit exams can be designed to enhance graduate preparedness, promote institutional accountability, and address equity concerns. By advocating for the integration of formative assessments, improved exam design, and a focus on student well-being, this research offers practical recommendations for creating a more equitable and effective assessment framework in higher education.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. It primarily relies on existing literature, which may not capture real-time developments in exit exam practices. Future research could explore the long-term impact of exit exams on graduates' careers, job satisfaction, and employability. Additionally, the review does not consider cultural and regional variations, and comparative studies could help identify best practices. The psychological effects of high-stakes exams on student well-being are underexplored, and alternative assessment methods, such as competency-based evaluations, are not addressed. Lastly, the role of technology in improving the accessibility and fairness of exit exams requires further investigation.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Several gaps in the literature warrant further exploration. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of exit exams on graduates' career trajectories and employability. Comparative studies across countries and disciplines can shed light on best practices for designing and implementing exit exams that balance rigor with inclusivity. Additionally, there is a need for research on the psychological effects of high-stakes exams and strategies to mitigate their negative impact on student well-being. Exploring alternative assessment methods, such as competency-based evaluations and portfolio assessments, can provide insights into more holistic approaches to measuring student achievement. Finally, studies on the role of technology in enhancing the accessibility and fairness of exit exams can inform future innovations in assessment practices.

6. CONCLUSION

Exit exams in higher education present a complex interplay of merits and demerits, influenced by variations in design, implementation practices, and institutional contexts. On the positive side, these exams serve as powerful tools for promoting standardization and accountability across academic programs. They provide measurable benchmarks to assess whether graduates possess the core competencies and knowledge required in their respective fields. Exit exams also align educational outcomes with industry standards, enhancing the credibility of degrees and supporting employability by assuring employers of a graduate's minimum qualifications.

However, despite these intended advantages, exit exams also introduce several significant challenges that may compromise their fairness and overall effectiveness. Chief among these are concerns related to educational equity, particularly for students from marginalized or under-resourced backgrounds who may lack access to adequate preparation and support. High-stakes testing environments can exacerbate psychological stress, promote surface-level learning focused on rote memorization, and encourage teaching practices centered on "teaching to the test" rather than fostering critical thinking or creativity. Furthermore, the rigid and often standardized nature of exit exams may fail to capture the full spectrum of student learning and individual potential, especially in diverse and interdisciplinary academic programs.

To maximize the benefits of exit exams while mitigating their limitations, higher education institutions must adopt a more balanced and holistic approach to assessment. This can be achieved by integrating formative assessments throughout the learning process, utilizing technology to enhance accessibility and flexibility, incorporating qualitative and competency-based metrics, and placing greater emphasis on student well-being. By reimagining exit exams as part of a broader, inclusive evaluation framework, universities can better prepare students to meet the dynamic challenges of the modern workforce while also ensuring that assessment practices uphold principles of fairness, equity, and meaningful learning.

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Author Contribution Statement

The author declares that the entire research and writing process for this article was conducted independently. The author assumes full responsibility for all data associated with this research. No other individual contributed as a co-author or made any significant contribution to the content of this work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval Statement

The author declares that this study is a literature review and does not involve human participants, personal data, or any other subjects. Therefore, this study does not require ethical approval from a research ethics committee. The entire research process was conducted in accordance with academic ethical standards, upholding scientific honesty, integrity, and the ethical use of legitimate sources

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