

Review Article

# The Positive and Negative Effects of Exit Exams in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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## Abstract

Exit exams in higher education are given before students graduate having multiple purposes. Exit exams affect higher education either positively or negatively. This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize the existing literature on the positive and negative effects of exit exams in higher education. In the literature search, the researcher used different electronic databases. Search terms were formulated and applied to the online databases. The databases used were ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Researchgate. A total of 111 study articles were identified, and 20 studies were included in the study after applying inclusion, exclusion, and quality assessment criteria. The review process was guided by the principal research question—what are the positive and negative effects of exit exams in higher education? Problem Intervention Comparisons Outcome (PICO) was used to formulate the research question. The paper was prepared using the planning, protocol, extraction, analysis, and reporting stages. This systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria and used Zotero for reference management. The systematic literature review revealed that exit exams have both positive and negative effects on the students, instructors, administrators, curriculum, and higher education intuitions. To this effect, attempts must be made to maximize the positive and minimize the negative effects of exit exams in higher education.

## Keywords

Exit Exams, Higher Education, Negative Effects, Positive Effects, PRISMA

## 1. Introduction

Exit exam refers to assessment implemented at the end of a specific program, course, study, or practice. It can act as a “gatekeeping” tool or as a basis for awarding a degree, individual awards, or other title [32]. Exit exams in higher education enhance students’ achievement, improve graduates performance, ensure common standard, boost public trust, and quality assurance through benchmarking potential issues and ongoing assessment [7].

Scholars in the area provided various purposes of exit

exams in higher education. Exit exams are required to graduate from universities and colleges in many countries. The primary purpose of the exit exams is to assess students’ educational achievement in the courses in their major area of program study. The goal of implementing exit exams is to encourage students to put effort into their learning. Exit exams can be a good quality indicator for academic program reviews and for educational institutes teaching standards. The compulsion of the exit exam will set into place new standards

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**Received:** 14 September 2024; **Accepted:** 4 October 2024; **Published:** 29 October 2024



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intended to increase the learning of all students. Such exams result in positive effects on student achievement. The implementation of exit exams is aimed at fostering a culture of diligence and dedication among students [30]. Exit exams in higher education are designed to assess program learning outcomes, motivate students, identify weaknesses, and aid in program enhancement through standardized testing [3].

According to Ayenew & Yohannes, exit exams can be internal or external, administered online or through paper and pencil methods [4]. The exam is supposed to measure the learning outputs of the program as a whole not the individual courses [3]. The design of exit exams in higher education involved institution-specific exams, lacking external verification, leading to corruption, tutoring, and eventual implementation [22]. Exit exams in higher education assess cognitive demands like knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. They vary in duration, curriculum breadth, and practical components across countries [15]. Central exit exams in higher education are externally developed, cover specific course content, signal various achievement levels, and assess a significant portion of expected knowledge, enhancing comparability and accountability [33].

According to El-Hussan and et. al., designs of appropriate assessment tools to measure student achievement of program learning outcomes (PLOs) represent a challenge to higher education. The effectiveness of exit exams depends not only on their design but also on their implementation processes. Moreover, exit exams influence student learning, teaching approaches, program improvement, and institutional outcomes [16].

A variety of measurement instruments are used in exit exams in higher education depending on the field of studies. Multiple choice questions [2]. Exit exams incorporate a mixture of assessment techniques [19]. This examination consisted of an objective structure clinical examination (OSCE), a multiple choice question (MCQ) paper and a modified essay question (MEQ) paper. The MEQ paper failed to achieve its primary purpose of assessing higher cognitive skills [26]. Higher education exit exams use a variety of instruments, with specific examples used in different fields. Both theoretical and clinical instruments are used in nursing, indicating the need for thorough assessment [29]. No such tests [Exit Exams] presently are available in criminal justice [12].

Factors to consider in designing higher education exit exam include student perceptions, alignment with program learning outcomes, question difficulty, student preparation methods, and potential improvements for validity and student engagement [16], focusing on general basic questions, avoiding complex formulas, ensuring question clarity, and aligning with program [3], and building assessment competencies, familiarizing students with exam technologies early, and addressing challenges like disabilities and technology access [5]. Exit exams in higher education should be carefully designed

to ensure alignment with learning outcomes, manage dropout rates, and facilitate credit utilization, enhancing learning experiences and inclusion opportunities [13].

The researchers in the area of exit exams also provide the areas measured through exit exams in higher education. Exit exams are used to measure the attitude, knowledge, and skill of graduates in terms of competency [3]. Exit exams focus on clinical and communication skills. They assess both generic and sub-specialty specific competencies and incorporate a mixture of assessment techniques [19].

This systematic literature review aimed to analyze and synthesize the exiting literature on the positive and negative influences of exit exams in higher education.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design and Procedures

This systematic literature review was conducted on studies on the positive and negative effects of exit exams in higher education between February 15, 2024, and May 1, 2024. A systematic literature review is a review of the research literature using systematic and explicit accountable methods [18]. A more elaborated definition of systematic literature review is provided by [27] as follows: “Systematic reviews are literature reviews that adhere closely to a set of scientific methods that explicitly aim to limit systematic error (bias), mainly by attempting to identify, appraise, and synthesize all relevant studies (of whatever design) to answer a particular question (or set of questions).”

The review process of this study was guided by the principal question what are the positive and negative effects of exit exams in higher education?

The systematic literature review contained 20 papers that were gathered from different databases—ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Researchgate. The author checked the Prospero database (<http://www.library.ucsf.edu/>) to determine if there are any published or ongoing projects related to the topic—the positive and negative effects of exit exams in higher education—in order to avoid any duplication. The finding showed that there are no ongoing or published articles in the area of this topic.

The paper was prepared in the following steps: planning, protocol, extraction, analysis, and reporting stages. This systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria. The researcher used Zotero for reference management, and a check was made as to the correctness of the referencing by Zotero.

### 2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This systematic literature review focused on the positive and negative effects of exit exams in higher education. The paper is excluded if it is written in a language other than

English, a paper published in a conference, a paper published as a book chapter, a paper published in predator journals, or a gray paper. In addition, studies focusing on high school exit exams, and studies lacking empirical evidence are excluded.

### 2.3. Quality Assessment

The following factors were considered as eligibility criteria in selecting the papers: Are the research goals clearly stated, are the papers peer-reviewed, and are the papers full-text, and

are the contents accessible?

### 2.4. Search Strategy and Source of Information

Search terms were formulated and applied to the online databases. Key terms were developed using various Boolean operators, such as "AND" and "OR." The following search terms were used: "Positive Effects of Exit Exams", OR "Negative Effects of Exit Exams", AND "Higher Education", OR "Universities", OR "Colleges", OR "Tertiary Education".

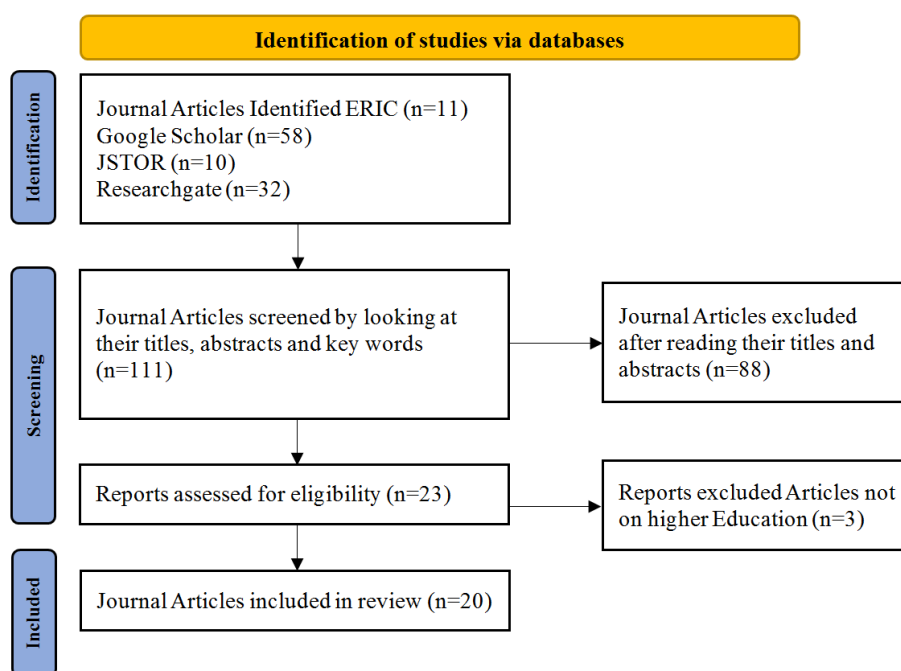


Figure 1. Search Strategy.

## 3. Results

This part of the systematic literature review presents studies containing the positive and negative effects of exit exams in higher education to be followed by the discussion section.

Researchers on the study of exit exams in higher education provided several positive effects of exit exams in higher education. Exit exams positively affect students, instructors, and intuitions in higher education context. Improve responsibility for Students, teachers, and institutions on student outcomes. Improve the progressive, integrated, and continuous learning habits of students. Qualify students for their future organizational work [2]. The exam serves to provide the departments, colleges, and universities with detailed up-to-date feedback, which helps to develop the program and its course. Results of the exit exams could be used by universities in the evaluation of their instructors and faculty members during one batch. This evaluation may impact the academic promotion of faculty members. This action would force instructors to do their

best to explain the content of the course well, which will impact significantly on the students' performance and proficiency [3]. The SWU-SET [Exit Exam in Thai] induced the teachers to put their effort into helping students achieve the course objectives and the test objectives [6]. The compulsion of the exit exam will set into place new standards intended to increase the learning of all students. Such exams result in positive effects on student achievement [21]. These exams demonstrably positively impact student performance [30]. The positive effects of exit exams in higher education include enhancing reflective thinking, aiding in articulating beliefs about teaching and learning and improving curriculum practices for students and teachers [23]. Exit exams in medical education aim to enhance quality, create a national network of doctors, and combat corruption, fostering standards in the medical profession [14]. Exit exams positively affect labor-market outcomes, enhancing higher education's relevance to job market needs, and potentially leading to improved employment prospects and skill alignment [28]. Exit exams in higher education determine access to further studies

or job opportunities impacting students' future career and life chances by providing certification of achievement [15]. According to Panjoy, exit exams can certify competency, enhance program quality, and ensure industry standards are met, benefiting both students and the industry [25]. Finally, exit exams in higher education enhance student achievement, standardize grading, and improve curriculum development, benefiting students, instructors, and overall educational quality [3].

Researchers on the study of exit exams in higher education also provided numerous negative effects of exit exams. The negative effects of exit exams in higher education include increased stress, anxiety, and fatigue among students, potentially due to pressure from teachers, impacting students' motivational and emotional experiences [3]. Exit exams in higher education harm students who fail by reducing graduation rates without benefiting those who pass [34]. Exit exams result in a focus on rote memorization, limited cognitive engagement, and potential narrowing of teaching to exam content [10]. Exit exams in higher education can lead to narrowed teaching practices due to their impact on assessment and planning affecting teacher behavior [31]. Statewide exit exams in Germany lead to teachers feeling de-professionalized, increased pressure on students and teachers, narrowed curriculum, and reduced responsiveness to student interest [1]. The implementation of exit exams can lead to increased uncertainty about passing exam and negative impacts on students' self-regulated learning [24]. Exit exams in higher education can reduce graduation rates and increase incarceration rates, particularly, when the exams are more challenging and standard-based [8]. Exit exams in higher education may discourage graduation with evidence showing a decrease in graduation rate [11]. Exit exams have developmental outcomes, decreased GPA, school engagement, and belonging, rather than positive effects in higher education [9]. According to French, exit exams in higher education can lead to drawbacks such as academic misconduct, stress, anxiety, and lack of empirical evidence supporting their pedagogical benefits [17]. Moreover, according to Slomp [31] exit exams in higher education impact teacher practices, lending to narrowed planning and assessment. Finally, [20] states, exit exams can lead to emotional distress, perceived failure, and limited academic choices for students, impacting their self-esteem and learning environment [20].

## 4. Discussion

In a discussion of the positive effects of exit exams in higher, one of the virtues of the exit exams in higher education is that it helps to improve the accountability system. It makes the results of the learning processes more clear to students and teachers. By taking these exams, both learners and educators get a greater realization of their strengths and weaknesses in a particular subject. In the end, the exams give the students a new chance and, at the same time, help to test the growth that they have made. Furthermore, it results in students who are

better equipped for the job market. However, even though they create real issues in education, the above-mentioned potential benefits imply their contributions to higher education and the students' better preparation for their careers. The creation of high-quality education is actually done through this way.

The multiple positive effects of exit exams in higher education, including increasing accountability and testing standardization, and quality assurance are accompanied by some negative effects. Among the most prominent are the growing stress, anxiety, academic misconduct, and fatigue of the examinees. It reduces graduation rate, results in rote learning, results in less cognitive engagement. It also results in perceived failure, low self-esteem and limited academic choice for students. Besides the difficulties of resource allocation, teaching to the test and equity-related problems are the problems of administration of exit exams in higher educations. Correcting these problems is a very sensitive matter that involves achieving a balance between the positive impact of exit exams on the educational process and their not conflicting with the wider objectives of higher education.

## 5. Conclusion

Exit exams in higher education represent a mix of positive and negative effects. They help in standardization, motivate students, and provide constructive feedback to the institutions for improvement. The implementation of these exams not only helps to ensure that graduates meet a certain level of competence but also for the industry, who seek to verify the employability of the graduates. However, there exists the negative side as well. The situation students go through to pass exit exams is a problem to their health and wellbeing. The systematic literature review also has showed that implementation of exit exams in higher education results in narrowed curriculum, contracted assessment, decrease in graduation rates, and a sense of low self-esteem in students. To enhance the positive effects of exit exams and ease their shortcomings, higher education has to guarantee that exit exams measure a wide range of skills, for example, critical thinking and practical knowledge, and match them with the curriculum, provide adequate resources for the preparation of exit exams, use exit exam results in the improvement of exit exam preparation, provision of student support, program design, continuous updating of exit exam content, and clarification of the exit exam's aim, format, and expectations.

## Abbreviations

PICO	Problem Intervention Comparison Outcome
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis



## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Dr. Addisu Worku and his wife Sr. Worknesh Yirgeta for the support they provided throughout my study.

## Author Contributions

Samson Worku Teshome is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Funding

No funding is provided for this work from anybody. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations are that of the author.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170909000908>

## Research Fields

**Samson Worku Teshome:** Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Assessment in Higher Education, Exit Examination, Policy Issues in higher Education, and Business Education