

Research Article

Exploring Barriers to University Exit Exams from the Perspective of Students at Dire Dawa University in Ethiopia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: University students face different challenges on the exit exam. However, since it is new in Ethiopia (started in 2023), there is a lack of data about their specific challenges, both nationally and in the study region. **Purpose:** This study aimed at exploring barriers to university exit exams from the perspective of students at Dire Dawa University in Ethiopia, which can help with interventions. **Methods:** This qualitative study was conducted at Dire Dawa University between August and September 2023. Study setting, and participants selected using the purposive and convenience sampling techniques respectively. Participants interviewed individually between 45 and 60 minutes using a semi-structured interview guide with the assistance of a voice recorder and field notes. The data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic approach. **Results:** Five main themes emerged from the data: limited awareness, opposing arguments, lack of motivation, commitment, and time, quality of the exit exam questions, and ineffective higher education institution. **Conclusion:** University students face various challenges that emanate from students, higher education institutions, and the Federal Ministry of Education. Therefore, the Federal Ministry of Education, higher education leaders, and teachers recommended improving the barriers and conducting multi-perspective research to better address these barriers.

Keywords

Barriers, Higher Education, Exit Exam

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to be seen as a viable means of boosting a nation's overall productivity and human resource potential [1-3]. In order to accomplish this, introducing exit exams (which are given at the end of higher

education completion) is one possible strategy to improve educational success and the standard of education [2, 4].

The aim of the exit exam is to ensure that all graduates from higher education institutions (HEIs) have attained sufficient

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core competencies outlined in the corresponding curricula, satisfying the requirements of the labor market and employability [3, 5, 6]. This is done by implementing curriculum-based external exit examinations, and this reduces inefficiencies in the educational process and raises educational outcomes [7, 8]. Although exit exams go by different names in different countries or states within a country, their overall goals are the same: to raise student achievement, graduate performance, improve education quality, and increase graduate competence in their fields of study [3, 4, 9, 10]. Besides, the exit exam has been found to have a number of benefits, including ensuring that all students have a common base of knowledge and practical skills, enhancing public confidence, enhancing the validity and reliability of assessment tools, and providing a tool for quality assurance to identify any potential issues in a country [2, 7, 11]. The vulnerability of HEIs in low-resource nations like Ethiopia to a lack of information, quality, and alternative education, as well as access to basic facilities like computers, is a problem [4, 12]. As a result, HEI students encounter a variety of obstacles in the HEI exit exams. However, there is a dearth of information regarding their specific barriers, both nationally and in the study region, as it is new in Ethiopia (beginning in 2023). So, the purpose of this study was to investigate these obstacles that might aid in interventions in Ethiopia and beyond.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Area and Design

The study was conducted in August 2023 at Dire Dawa University, which is the only public university in the Dire Dawa Administration, located about 515 kilometers east of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, and 311 kilometers west of Djibouti port. Due to the qualitative nature of the research questions and the purpose of the study, a qualitative design was used. This approach was chosen to involve students at their university who took the exit exam. A qualitative design is particularly relevant where information is required directly from those study subjects and where time and resources are limited [13, 14].

2.2. Researcher and Interviewer Characteristics

All four authors hold master's degrees in different health fields: three in maternity and neonatal nursing, one in public health, and one in clinical midwifery. Three of them reside and work in Dire Dawa City, and two live in Werabe City and work at Werabe University. The principal researcher (AM) provided overall leadership for the work. The research team consisted of one female and three males with experience in teaching at public universities, qualitative research studies, and community services in urban and rural areas. The research team had no prior relationship with the participants, and the participants were unaware of the researchers. The interview-

ers, three men with MSc degrees in nursing and midwifery and experience in qualitative research interviews, were selected from Dire Dawa City. They all spoke local languages (Afan Oromo and Amharic).

2.3. Sampling Strategy

The study setting was selected using the purposive sampling technique since Dire Dawa University is the only public university available in the study region. Participants were selected using the convenience technique. Participants were eligible to participate in the study if they were legally adults (18 or older years) and took the HEI exit exam at Dire Dawa University (2023 G. C.) from different departments (Accounting, Economics, Law, Sociology, Journalism, Business Administration, Public Administration, and Management). They were selected after informed, voluntary written consent. After all, they were interviewed privately in a quiet place in the university compound. However, technology like engineering, computer science, and health science students were excluded as their exit exam was in a different time period from the social ones.

2.4. Data Collection Methods

An interview guide was developed from a review of the literature [6, 15]. Audio recording and field notes were also used. The interview guide is available in the appendices (appendices I and II). Participants were contacted through class representatives. Then participants were informed of the purpose of the interview, audio recordings, and field notes and that every piece of information they provided would remain confidential (their identities and answers would remain confidential) and would be used for research purposes only by the principal author and interviewers. Finally, voluntary participants were noted, and their phones were taken and an arranged time for the interview. All interviews were conducted individually at a quiet place in the university compound by local language (Amharic or Afan Oromo) and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in August 2023.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Study participants were interviewed after obtaining ethical clearances from Dawa University. Two consent forms were signed per participant prior to the interview. One form was handed to the interviewers, and the other remained with the participant. All information obtained was kept confidential during all stages of the study. The collected data were used only for the purpose of the study.

2.6. Data Analyses

The data analysis method used in this study was Maguire and Delahunt's six-step approach: 1) developing familiarity with the data through reading and reflection; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes;

5) defining themes; and 6) reporting themes [16, 17]. All interviews, audio recordings, and field notes were combined, transcribed, and translated verbatim from the local language to English by experts fluent in both languages (the local language and English). Investigators independently perused the transcripts and independently coded them. The consistency of the transcribed data was checked by listening and reading repeatedly. The process of data coding was executed sentence by sentence, encompassing crucial aspects of the transcript content. Codes were created by individual authors and then combined. When there were variations in translation, the research teams discussed and explained the results after a consensus was reached. Codes were analyzed to generate themes that share similar concepts. Similar codes are grouped into broader categories and compared within and across interviews to determine commonalities and variations. The codes were then collapsed into themes, and the themes. Finally, thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyze the interview data, and the themes were linked to literature, and finally, a point of view was created. The identified themes were discussed and compared across the transcripts to determine discrepancies and similarities in the perspectives of the study [18]. For this research, an inductive, data-driven approach to analysis was taken, adopting Maguire and Delahunt's six-step approach [16, 17]. The goal was to report a rich, overall description of the whole data set rather than explore particular aspects in more detail. Factors related to HEI exit exams were included based on a single mention, and the document was thoroughly reviewed using the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies) check list.

2.7. Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness involves the following factors: 1) credibility (in preference to internal validity), 2) transferability (in preference to external validity or generalizability), 3) dependability (in preference to reliability), and 4) conformability (in preference to objectivity) [14, 18-24]. Thus, to enhance trustworthiness, the pilot interview guide was tested three days before the actual interviews with the four participants. Two days of training were provided to the interviewers regarding procedures, how to approach participants, interviewing and discussing sensitive issues, and using voice recordings and field notes. All interviews conducted in the local dialect were translated into English and transcribed verbatim; content analysis was used to code the data. The collected data were stored on a secure and password-protected computer by the corresponding author and co-authors. No names or specific identifiers were used in the data processing, analysis, or dissemination of research results. Participants' responses were anonymous on tape and field notes.

3. Results

3.1. Participant Characteristics

Twenty-three eligible students were involved in the interview. Students' ages ranged from 23 to 29 years old. All were graduates of Dire Dawa University (2023), with different departments [Table 1].

Table 1. Demographic data of participants, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, 2023.

Variables	Category	Frequency and percentage
Age (in completed years)	Between 23 and 25	9(39.1)
	Over 25	14(60.9)
Residence (came from)	Urban	12(52.2)
	Rural	11(47.8)
Sex	Female	9(39.1)
	Male	14(60.9)
	Accounting	4(17.4)
	Management	3 (13)
	Economics	2 (8.7)
	Business Administration	2 (8.7)
	Sociology	4(17.4)
	Public Administration and Management (PADM)	2 (8.7)
	Statistics	2 (8.7)
	Journalism	4 (17.4)
Exit exam status	Passed	12 (52.2)
	Not passed	11 (47.8)

3.2. Exit Exam Status

Almost half (52.2%) of the study participants were passed their exit exam. Likewise, 47.8 study participants were from the failure ones.

4. Themes

Five main themes emerged from the data: limited awareness, opposing arguments, lack of motivation, commitment, and time, quality of the exit exam questions, and ineffective HEI administration.

4.1. Theme 1: Limited Awareness

As per the finding, one of the barriers to HEI exit exams is a lack of information about the HEI exit exam, like their content, focus areas, courses, and so on. A participant described, "Since the exit exam was new and just started in our batch this year (2023), most students, including me, suffered from a lack of clear information about the HEI exit exam".

Another one said, "There was a lack of uniform information about the consequences for failing students and whether the pass or fail of the exit exam should be a criterion for employment or recruitment procedures."

In addition, not only HEI students but also stakeholders (teachers, department heads, school or college deans, and other HEI top officials) have challenges getting adequate information about the general nature of the exit exam. This is in fact since the exit exam was new in Ethiopia for students other than law and medicine, and the exit exam is only prepared at the ministry of education, then distributed to each university in the country.

A participant narrated, "Not only students but also teachers, school deans, and presidents lack information about the exit exam; when we ask them, they do not give clear information; I do not know their real reason; so many students failed due to a lack of this information and preparation".

4.2. Theme 2: Opposing Arguments

Since there was a lack of clarity on the fate of students after the exit exam, there was resistance to the procedure of the HEI exit exam from students. A participant narrated, "Students made a group struggle for either the exit exam to be postponed to next year's students or to be generally avoided, believing that it is a defective system. Students also argued that if the exit exam is a graduation requirement, the four- to six-year evaluation is worthless. Therefore, determining the fate of a student through a one-shot exit exam is unfair and inappropriate".

A participant stated that "students in different departments were arguing about the last week of the exit exam schedule, and since we were also somewhat confused about the nature of it." The other one stated, "I think most students, including me, believe that the exit exam is in contradiction to continuous assessment".

4.3. Theme 3: Lack of Motivation, Commitment, and Time

The other students' barriers in HEI's exit exam were a lack of motivation, commitment, and time to cover all courses learned from the first year to graduation. Lack of motivation, commitment, and time could be barriers for HEIs exit exam. A participant detailed, "Since we lack encouragers in our university who are directing students like which courses and topics to focus on and how to read and prepare for the exit exam, obviously we students are less motivated, less com-

mitted to the exit exam." Another described, "Most students, including me, were confused about how to cover all four years courses; there was time constraint, so they lacked hope and were less committed to studying all those courses".

4.4. Theme 4: Quality of the Exit Exam Questions

HEI students face barriers related to the quality of the exit exam. The HEI exit exam had questions like the inclusion of courses that are not majors in professions and many courses. A participant articulated, "The HEI exit exam content was generally not parallel within the specific department's curriculum to what we were learning".

The findings also explored that HEI exit exam content had a lack of objectivity or included questions that needed to be updated or modified. A participant detailed, "The HEI exit exam was not as many students expected as to me because there were varying types of exam inclusions like memory testing questions, the incorporation of subjective questions, and some questions were not up-to-date. I mean, some definitions and component criteria in new edition text books are far away from the old ones. But there were some questions prepared based on old text books".

Besides, another participant stated that "some questions are not compatible with the given average time due to a lack of correction from invigilators, and some questions were incorrect with double answers".

4.5. Theme 5: Ineffective HEI Administration

Moreover, the present study identified a new HEI exit exam barrier, which is ineffective HEI administration and a lack of committed and responsible teachers, department heads, and college deans for students' preparation for HEI exit exams. This was exemplified by participants, like lack of preparation materials, exam models for HEI exit exams, computers, and trained teachers were listed as barriers to HEI exit exams.

A participant expressed, "There was a lack of committed and responsible teachers, department heads, and college deans for students' preparation for HEI's exit exam, like making adequate access to reference materials and computer access".

The other one detailed, "HEIs lack support for students like ICT rooms, computers, focused reading materials, laboratories, and even suitable examination places".

The other one added, "No extra care: Since the exit exam is new, there is no information about it, so students get terror, get sick, read more than usual, and get hunger, thirst, and so on. There is no compensation mechanism if they miss it, and there is no extra food or emergency treatment. All these were barriers to me and others, but the HEIs did almost nothing regarding these issues".

5. Discussion

This qualitative study examined the barriers of HEI's exit exam from students' perspectives in Dire Dawa University, Ethiopia. The findings revealed that HEI experienced a variety of barriers related to the HEI exit exam, including limited awareness, opposing arguments, lack of motivation, commitment, and time, quality of the exit exam questions, and ineffective HEI administration. The impact of these challenges on their HEI exit exam score was significant and highlights the need to actively incorporate psycho-emotional and supportive methods in the HEIs.

The findings explored that university students were impacted by informational hurdles regarding the HEI exit exam, including its intended subject areas and content. Additionally, there was insufficient information available for college deans, teachers, and senior officials at HEI to understand the purpose and consequences of the exit exam. This was true since the HEI exit exam is brand-new in Ethiopia and is only prepared by the federal ministry of education before being sent to every university. Studies indicate that students' adequate information about the nature of the HEI exit exam can enhance their focus and preparation, resulting in educational success for both students and institutions [11, 15].

The findings explored the idea that students are opposing the HEI exit evaluation because of ambiguous outcomes. They contend that because a one-shot exam goes against continual assessment, it is unfair and improper. They are arguing that the exam should be avoided or postponed because they think it is necessary to graduate. A study in Ethiopia supports the idea that opposing arguments among students are additional barriers to HEI's exit exam [15].

Students face barriers in HEI's exit exam due to lack of motivation, commitment, and time. Lack of university encouragers and confusion about covering all four years of courses contribute to reduced motivation and commitment. Time constraints further complicate the process. Studies indicate that support and preparation from HEI students and encouragement from HEI staff motivate them to work harder to meet HEI standards [2, 7, 15]. HEI students face challenges with the quality of the exit exam, including non-major courses, lack of objectivity, outdated questions, and compatibility issues with average time and double answers. Studies suggest that focusing on question validity is crucial to minimize challenges in exit exams and assess student learning and attainment [1, 2, 7]. The study identified new barriers to HEI exit exams, such as ineffective administration, lack of committed leaders and teachers, inadequate preparation materials, and lack of staff support. Besides, the study highlights barriers to the HEI exit exam, including students' psychology, inspiration, encouragement, and ineffective supportive systems, with implications for practice and future research. As a result, the findings of this study have implications for HEI societies (administrators, teachers, and students) and future research. Ministry of Education to focus major professional courses and quality of HEI exit exam

preparations in terms of content, objectivity, and time. HEI leaders and staff must prioritize the need to consider information access, education material access, and student support from teachers and other HEI higher officials in preparation for the exit exam. HEIs students to think over the barriers and prepare themselves in many alternative preparation approaches for the HEI exit exam. Furthermore, research should encompass multiple perspectives, including HEI leaders and teachers, about the HEI exit exam barriers. Research also needed to identify HEI exit exam barriers from the perspectives of disabled HEI students and non-regular students (continuing and distance) in different HEIs. Furthermore, in many African countries, HEI students face barriers, including during exit exams, and major barriers need to be explored for better intervention. So, it is an important topic for the intervention of the education sector. Our findings can offer important contributions to the literature and be used to develop and implement targeted education messaging, education programs, and interventions focused on alleviating educational outcome barriers.

5.1. Study Strengths

The study design enabled in-depth inquiry into HEI exit exam barriers both in passed and failed students' perspectives. The study included a diverse sample (from different departments, sex, and residence). The accuracy of the data was improved by the use of primary data and experienced interviewers.

5.2. Study Limitation

The study only included HEI students' perspectives and did not assess HEI leaders, teachers, disabled HEI students, non-regular students (continuing and distance) perspectives, and included only single public university students, which was a limitation of this study.

6. Conclusion

University students face various challenges that emanate from students (opposing arguments, lack of motivation and commitment), HEI (limited awareness, ineffective administration, support, and encouragement), and the Federal Ministry of Education (quality of the exit exam questions). Therefore, the Federal Ministry of Education, higher education leaders, and teachers recommended improving the barriers and conducting multi-perspective research to better address these barriers.

Abbreviations

HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
ICT	Information Communication Technology

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Author Contributions

Aminu Mohammed Yasin: participated in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, software, resources, supervision, validation, visualization, writing the original draft, writing review, and editing.

Bezabih Amsalu: Data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, software, resources, supervision, validation, visualization, writing the original draft, Writing review and editing.

Zeynia Hassen: Data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, visualization, writing the original draft, writing review, and editing.

Neima Redwan Abdu: Data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, visualization, writing the original draft, writing review, and editing.

Leyla Abrar Bedru: Data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, visualization, writing the original draft, writing review, and editing.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval was obtained on July, 2023, from the institutional ethical review board (IRB) of Dire Dawa University. Informed written consent was obtained from all study participants. All protocols were carried out in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations of Helsinki.

Declaration

We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets collected and analyzed for this study are available from the corresponding author and can be obtained upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix

Appendix I: Preamble

Thank you so much for meeting with us today and agreeing to participate in this interview. I want to remind you that what you say here is confidential and will not be linked back to you, your family, or your school, nor will others identify you in any way. We are recording this interview and taking field notes so that we can transcribe it. This means we will type out the words said in this interview into a secure document for analysis. There will be no identifiers on the transcripts. The de-identified transcripts will be accessed by other members of the research team to perform the analysis. The purpose of this interview is to explore your opinions and perceptions about our study topic. We are here to learn from you, so anything you have to share is welcome. Nothing you say here will affect me or you in any way. There are no right or wrong answers.

Appendix II: Semi-Structured Question Guide

Good morning/afternoon!

How was your stay at the university?

How do university students generally overlook the Higher Education Exit Exam? Does every university student love it?

Interviewer:... I have heard people say different things about the Higher Education Exit Exam; some say it is nice, some others say it varies points. What is yours?

Interviewer:... I heard again people saying there are various challenges university students face from the exit exam. What's your opinion, please.

You can tell me your own or others you observed.

What should be improved regarding the Higher Education Exit Exam? What's your opinion, please?

We really appreciate your time and insight. Thank you once again.

Before we wrap up, is there anything that you think is important for us?

Really, to the last, anything you want to say.

Thank you very much!

Appendix III: Summary of Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes of the Study

The summary of major themes, sub-themes, and codes of the study are listed on the below table [Table 2].

Table 2. The summary of major themes, sub-themes, and codes of the study, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, 2023.

Themes	Theme I: Limited awareness	Theme II: Opposing arguments	Theme III: Lack of motivation, commitment, and time	Theme IV: Quality of the exit exam questions	Theme V: Ineffective HEI administration
Sub-themes	Information access Communication or feedback	Resistance to take the exit exam Group struggle to postpone Hope	Motivation Commit Time	Objectivity of the exit exam Standardizing the exit exam	Lack of supportive systems Lack of preparation
Codes	Electric power Computer access Informed teachers, department heads, school/college deans, and higher officials in HEIs The exit exam is new.	The exit exam is against continuous assessment. The exit exam is a defective system. The exit exam is a one-time shoot killer. Four years of education with two hours of evaluative A one-shot exit exam is unfair. A one-shot exit exam inappropriate	Lack of effort to study Lack of assurance Confusion about the nature of the exit exam	Lack of objectivity Enormous number of courses in the exam The unpredictability of the courses to appear Non-curriculum-based debatable questions Incompatible questions with average time Lack of corrections	Access to learning and reference materials Access to the library with computer or ICT rooms, laboratory rooms Psychology readiness- inspiration Encouragement and support

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