

Exit exams design in higher education: A systematic review

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Abstract: This systematic literature review explores the design issues surrounding exit exams in higher education, focusing on their validity, reliability, and impact on student outcomes. As exit exams have become integral to assessing student competencies, the need for effective and equitable assessment strategies is paramount. The review synthesizes two decades of research to identify key challenges, including the alignment of exam content with educational objectives, the tension between standardization and customization, and the engagement of diverse stakeholders. The findings reveal that while exit exams are essential for ensuring graduates meet established competencies, they often face criticism due to concerns over fairness and the potential narrowing of curricula. The review underscores the importance of stakeholder perspectives, including those of faculty, students, and administrators, in shaping the design and implementation of exit exams. Furthermore, ethical considerations regarding the role of assessments in educational experiences are discussed. The review concludes with recommendations for a holistic approach to exit exam design, emphasizing collaboration among stakeholders and the need for ongoing training for faculty. Future research directions are also proposed, advocating for innovative assessment strategies and longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impacts of exit exams. By addressing these critical design issues, this review aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse in higher education assessment and promote student achievement and educational equity.

Keywords: Assessment, curricula, educational equity, exam content

Abstrak: Tinjauan pustaka sistematis ini mengeksplorasi isu desain seputar ujian akhir di pendidikan tinggi, dengan fokus pada validitas, reliabilitas, dan dampaknya terhadap hasil belajar siswa. Karena ujian akhir telah menjadi bagian integral untuk menilai kompetensi siswa, kebutuhan akan strategi penilaian yang efektif dan adil menjadi sangat penting. Tinjauan ini mensintesis dua dekade penelitian untuk mengidentifikasi tantangan utama, termasuk penyesuaian konten ujian dengan tujuan pendidikan, ketegangan antara standarisasi dan kustomisasi, dan keterlibatan berbagai pemangku kepentingan. Temuan tersebut mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun ujian akhir sangat penting untuk memastikan lulusan memenuhi kompetensi yang ditetapkan, ujian tersebut sering menghadapi kritik karena kekhawatiran atas keadilan dan potensi penyempitan kurikulum. Tinjauan ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya perspektif pemangku kepentingan, termasuk dari fakultas, mahasiswa, dan administrator, dalam membentuk desain dan implementasi ujian akhir. Lebih jauh, pertimbangan etis mengenai peran penilaian dalam pengalaman pendidikan dibahas. Tinjauan ini diakhiri dengan rekomendasi untuk pendekatan holistik terhadap desain ujian akhir, yang menekankan kolaborasi di antara para pemangku kepentingan dan perlunya pelatihan berkelanjutan bagi fakultas. Arah penelitian di masa mendatang juga diusulkan, yang menganjurkan strategi penilaian inovatif dan studi longitudinal untuk mengevaluasi dampak jangka panjang ujian akhir. Dengan mengatasi masalah desain yang kritis ini, tinjauan ini bertujuan untuk berkontribusi pada wacana yang sedang berlangsung dalam penilaian pendidikan tinggi dan meningkatkan prestasi siswa serta pemerataan pendidikan.

Kata kunci: Penilaian, kurikulum, kesetaraan pendidikan, konten ujian

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INTRODUCTION

Exit exams have become a prominent feature of higher education, serving as critical assessments that gauge student competencies and readiness for professional practice. These assessments are designed to ensure that graduates possess the necessary skills and

knowledge to succeed in their respective fields (Teshome, 2024). However, their effectiveness is often challenged by various design issues that can impact their validity and reliability.

The increasing emphasis on accountability and educational outcomes has intensified scrutiny of exit exams. Institutions are under considerable pressure to produce graduates who meet established competencies, leading to a growing focus on the design and implementation of these assessments (Warren & Grodsky, 2009). As Baker (2019) notes, the accountability movement requires educational institutions to demonstrate that their graduates possess the essential skills and knowledge necessary for success in the workforce. This scrutiny necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence exit exam design, particularly how these exams align with curricular objectives and the educational values of the institution.

Previous studies have identified several key design issues, including the alignment of exam content with curricular objectives, the balance between standardization and customization, and the engagement of diverse stakeholders. These elements are crucial for ensuring that exit exams not only measure knowledge effectively but also reflect the educational values of the institution (Hughes et al., 2015). For instance, Teshome (2024) highlights the tension between the need for standardized assessments—essential for comparability across institutions—and the desire for customization to meet the specific needs of various academic programs.

Furthermore, the impact of exit exams on curricular decisions raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding the potential narrowing of the curriculum. As institutions feel compelled to "teach to the test," the broader goals of education may be compromised, necessitating a reevaluation of assessment practices (Piopiunik et al., 2013). This ethical dilemma underscores the importance of considering the diverse perspectives of stakeholders, including faculty, students, and administrators, in the design process (Baker, 2019).

Ultimately, understanding the complexities surrounding exit exams is essential for developing effective assessment strategies that promote student success and educational equity. Engaging stakeholders in the design process can help bridge gaps in understanding and foster a sense of ownership among all parties involved (Hughes et al., 2015).

The design issues surrounding exit exams have been studied through various methodologies and approaches in previous research. Some of the ways were literature reviews, case studies, surveys, qualitative research, statistical analysis, comparative studies, and thematic analysis. This research distinguishes itself by employing a systematic review methodology, providing a holistic perspective, emphasizing stakeholder engagement, addressing ethical considerations, and proposing future research directions, thereby contributing more comprehensively to the discourse on exit exams in higher education.

This systematic literature review, therefore, aims to synthesize existing research on the design issues of exit exams in higher education, providing insights into their implications for student outcomes and institutional practices. By addressing these critical design issues, the review seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on assessment in higher education. The review will also serve as a foundation for future research and practice in the field, highlighting the need for a collaborative approach to exit exam design that prioritizes inclusivity and addresses the diverse needs of students. In summary, this

systematic review is necessary to synthesize existing knowledge, identify critical design issues, and provide recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness and equity of exit exams in higher education.

METHOD

This systematic literature review employed a structured approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research related to the design issues of exit exams in higher education. The methodology followed five key stages: defining research questions, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, conducting a comprehensive literature search, extracting and analyzing data, and synthesizing findings.

Defining research questions

The review aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the key design issues associated with exit exams in higher education?
2. How do these design issues impact student outcomes and institutional practices?
3. What are the perspectives of various stakeholders on exit exams design?

Establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the literature reviewed. Studies included were: Peer-reviewed articles published in the last twodecade, research focusing on exit exams in higher education contexts, and studies discussing exit exams design issues, outcomes, or stakeholder perspectives. The exclusion criteria included: Articles not available in English, grey literature, such as reports or opinion pieces without empirical research, and studies focusing solely on K-12 education or unrelated assessment types.

Conducting a comprehensive literature search

A comprehensive search was conducted using electronic databases, including JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Specific keywords and phrases were used, such as "exit exams," "higher education assessment," "exam design issues," and "stakeholder perspectives." The search was supplemented by reviewing the reference lists of key articles to identify additional relevant studies. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis) was used in the systematic review.

Extracting and analyzing data

Data extraction involved summarizing key information from each study, including authors, publication year, research methods, findings, and issues of exit exam design. A thematic analysis was conducted to categorize the extracted data into key design issues, stakeholder perspectives, and impacts on curriculum.

Synthesizing findings

The final stage involved synthesizing the findings into coherent themes that addressed the research questions. This synthesis highlighted commonalities and differences across studies, providing a comprehensive overview of the design issues associated with exit exams in higher education.

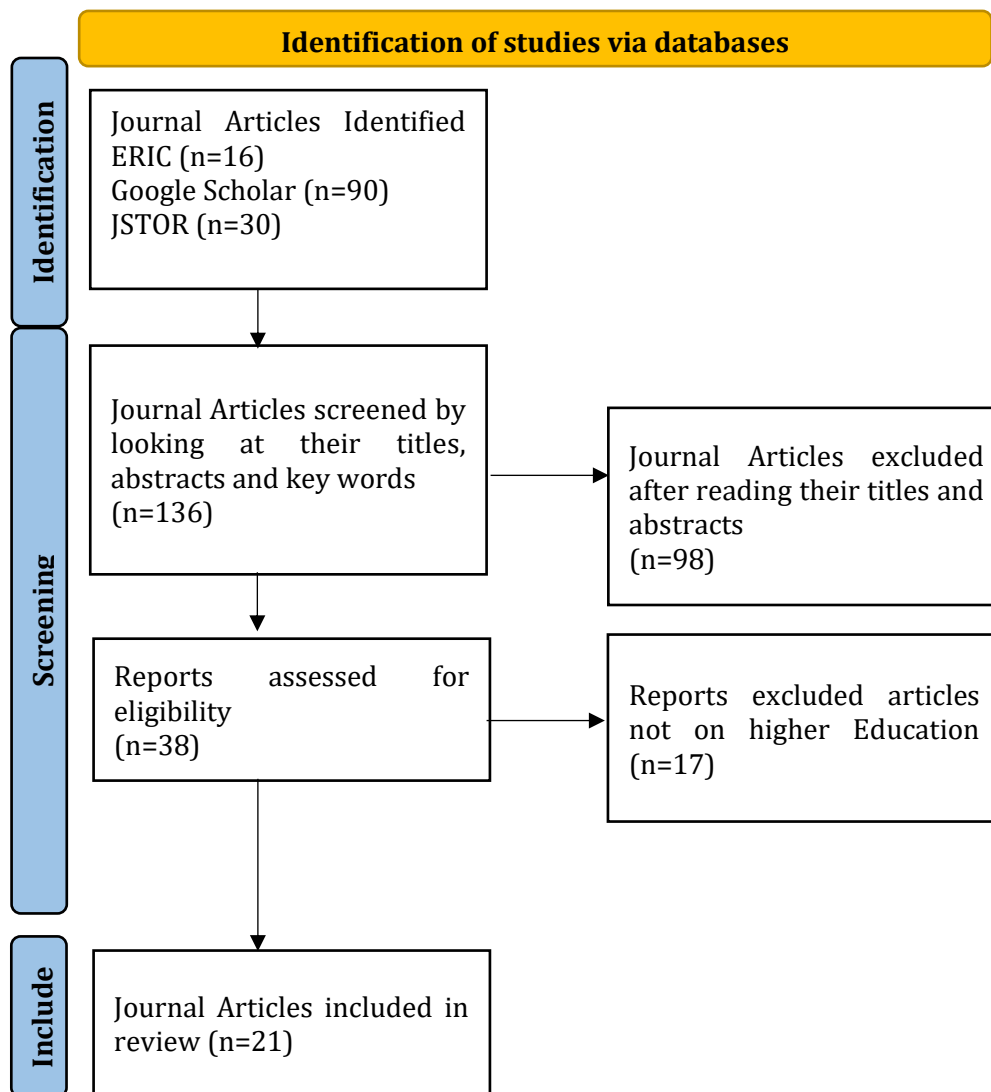


Fig. 1. Search strategy

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Here is the extracted information regarding the authors, data sources, objectives of the studies, methodologies used, and design issues of higher education exit exams presented in a tabular format.

Table 1. Extraction result of studies included in the review

| Author(s) and Year | Objective | Data Sources | Methodology | Design Issues |
|-----------------------|---|---|------------------------|---|
| Ackeren et al. (2012) | To analyze the impact of statewide exit exams on educational outcomes | Case study of three German states with differing exam regimes | Descriptive case study | Variability in exam stakes and their educational implications |

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|---------------------------------------|--|--|------------------------|---|
| Aristeidou et al. (2024) | To explore acceptance and satisfaction with online exams among distance learning students | Data from distance learning students in higher education. | Survey research | Student perceptions of online assessment formats. |
| Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022) | To investigate washback effects on teaching due to exit examinations | Case study of an exit examination at the higher education level. | Qualitative case study | Effects of exit exams on teaching practices and curricula |
| Baker (2019) | To model the antecedents of state affirmative action bans in the context of higher education | Data analysis on state affirmative action bans and their impact on racial equity in higher education | Statistical analysis | Relationship between exit exams and racial equity in admissions |
| Benner (2013) | To examine the relationship between exit examinations and developmental outcomes | Survey data from adolescents regarding exit examinations | Survey research | Effects of exit exams on adolescent development and peer academic climate |
| Bishop (1999) | To assess the importance of national exit examinations for educational efficiency | Literature review on national exit examinations. | Literature review | Educational efficiency and potential impacts of exit examinations |
| Bracey (2009) | To critique the effectiveness of mandatory exit exams in encouraging graduation | Analysis of mandatory exit exams and their effects on graduation rates | Descriptive analysis | Negative impacts of exit exams on student graduation rates |
| Dehury (2017) | To evaluate the role of exit exams in ensuring the quality of | Examination of exit exams for medical graduates in India | Descriptive analysis | Quality assurance in medical education |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|----------------------|---|
| | medical education | | | through exit exams |
| Fanjoy et al. (2005) | To investigate the necessity of exit exams in college flight programs | Data from college flight programs | Survey research | Certification of competency versus redundancy in exit exams |
| French (2021) | To explore the intersection of race, racism, and affirmative action in Brazil and the United States | Analysis of race and affirmative action in educational contexts | Comparative analysis | Implications of exit exams on racial equity and affirmative action policies |
| Hughes et al. (2015) | To discuss challenges in partnerships that may affect exit exam outcomes | Study on university-industry partnerships | Survey | Impact of partnerships on educational assessments and exit exams |
| Khan et al. (2023) | To assess the role of exit exams in enhancing the profession of pharmacy practice | Review of pharmacy exit exams in India | Review study | Alignment of exit exams with professional standards in pharmacy |
| Merki (2011) | To analyze the effects of implementing state-wide exit exams on self-regulated learning | Study on state-wide exit exams and their effects on students | Empirical study | Self-regulation and learning outcomes related to exit exams |
| Moore et al. (2021) | To identify predictors of success for BSN students on the HESI exit exam | Data on BSN student performance on exit exams. | Correlational study | Academic and non-academic predictors influencing exit exam performance |
| Piopiunik et al. (2013) | To examine the relationship between central exit exams and labor market outcomes | Analysis of central school exit exams and labor market outcomes | Empirical analysis | Labor market relevance of exit exams in education |

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Siddiqui et al. (2023) | To evaluate the impact of exit exams on advancing pharmacy practice | Comprehensive review of pharmacy exit exams in India. | Comprehensive literature review | Role of exit exams in professional competency and practice advancement |
| Teshome (2024) | To synthesize research on the design issues of exit exams in higher education | Systematic literature review on exit exams in higher education | Systematic literature review | Design issues related to validity, reliability, stakeholder perspectives, and curriculum impact |
| Vaneziano and Brown (1994) | To present a case study on the development of an exit examination for graduating seniors in criminal justice | Development of an exit examination in criminal justice | Case study | Design considerations for subject-specific exit exams |
| Warren and Grodsky (2009) | To assess the consequences of exit exams on students who fail them and those who pass | Review of the effects of exit exams on students. | Review study | Harmful effects on students who fail exit exams without demonstrated benefits for those who pass |
| Weir (2010) | To evaluate the use of exit exams as an assessment tool in journalism and mass communication programs | Assessment of entry/exit exams in journalism programs | Empirical study | Effectiveness of entry/exit exams in measuring student competency in journalism |
| Woessmann (2018) | To investigate how central exit exams improve student outcomes | Analysis of central exit exams and student outcomes | Comparative analysis | Impact of exit exams on educational outcomes |

Table 1, depicted a comprehensive summary of the studies included in the systematic review examining various facets of exit exams in higher education, detailing their objectives, data sources, methodologies, and design issues. Each study contributes unique insights into the complexities surrounding these assessments. Ackeren et al. (2012) conducted a descriptive case study on statewide exit exams in Germany, analyzing their educational implications and the variability in exam stakes. Aristeidou et al. (2024) explored acceptance and satisfaction with online assessments among distance learning students through survey research, revealing significant student perceptions regarding these formats. Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022) focused on the washback effects of exit examinations on teaching practices and curricula, employing qualitative case studies to uncover the nuanced impacts of these assessments.

Baker (2019) modeled the relationship between exit exams and state affirmative action bans, emphasizing their implications for racial equity in higher education. Benner (2013) examined the association between exit exams and adolescent developmental outcomes, highlighting the influence of these assessments on peer academic climate. Bishop (1999) assessed the importance of national exit exams for educational efficiency through a literature review, while Bracey (2009) critiqued the negative impacts of mandatory exit exams on graduation rates.

Carol and Brown (1994) presented a case study on developing an exit examination in criminal justice, identifying design considerations for subject-specific exams. Dehury (2017) evaluated the role of exit exams in ensuring quality assurance in medical education in India. Fanjoy et al. (2005) investigated the necessity of exit exams in college flight programs, questioning their redundancy versus competency certification.

French (2021) explored the intersection of race and affirmative action in educational contexts, using comparative analysis to assess the implications of exit exams on racial equity. Hughes et al. (2015) discussed challenges in university-industry partnerships that may affect exit exam outcomes. Khan et al. (2023) reviewed pharmacy exit exams in India, focusing on their alignment with professional standards.

Merki (2011) analyzed the effects of implementing state-wide exit exams on self-regulated learning. Moore et al. (2021) identified predictors of success for BSN students on exit exams through a correlational study. Piopiunik et al. (2013) examined the relationship between central exit exams and labor market outcomes, highlighting educational relevance.

Siddiqui et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of pharmacy exit exams, assessing their role in advancing professional competency. Teshome (2024) synthesized research on design issues related to exit exams, focusing on validity, reliability, and stakeholder perspectives. Woessmann (2018) investigated how central exit exams improve student outcomes through comparative analysis. Lastly, Warren and Grodsky (2009) reviewed the harmful effects of exit exams on students who fail them, questioning the benefits for those who pass. Weir (2010) evaluated the effectiveness of entry/exit exams in journalism programs, rounding out this diverse collection of research on exit exams in higher education.

Overview of findings

This systematic literature review synthesizes research on the design issues of exit exams in higher education, highlighting their essential role in assessing student

competencies and educational outcomes. While intended as reliable indicators of student readiness for professional practice, several design challenges can undermine their effectiveness and acceptance. The findings emphasize the need for exit exams to be both valid and reliable. The review also identifies the issue of standardization and customization; standardized assessments enable comparisons but may overlook unique program requirements. Stakeholder perspectives—including those of faculty and students—are crucial in shaping effective exit exams. Additionally, exit exam design can influence curricula, as institutions may feel compelled to "teach to the test." Addressing these challenges is vital for enhancing the credibility and utility of exit exams.

Key design issues identified

Validity and reliability

A primary concern identified in the review is the validity and reliability of exit exams. Validity refers to the extent to which an assessment accurately measures what it is supposed to measure, while reliability pertains to the consistency of results across different contexts. The literature emphasizes that for exit exams to be effective, their content must align closely with educational objectives. Misalignment can result in assessments that do not accurately reflect student learning or competencies. Furthermore, the review indicates that the reliability of exit exams is often questioned due to the diverse backgrounds and learning experiences of students. Disparities in performance among different student groups can undermine the credibility of the exams and the institutions that administer them. Low reliability can lead to significant consequences, including a lack of confidence in the assessment process and potential negative impacts on student morale and outcomes.

Standardization vs. customization

The literature reveals a tension between the need for standardized assessments and the desire for customization to meet the specific needs of various academic programs. While standardization can facilitate comparisons across institutions, it may overlook the unique contexts and learning outcomes pertinent to different disciplines (Teshome, 2024). Conversely, customization ensures assessments reflect the specific skills needed in various disciplines, enhancing relevance and student engagement. Striking a balance is crucial; a hybrid approach can incorporate standardized elements alongside customized components, promoting validity while addressing diverse competencies. Engaging stakeholders in assessment design and regularly reviewing exam relevance are essential for effective outcomes.

Stakeholder perspectives

The perspectives of various stakeholders—including faculty, students, and administrators—play a vital role in the design of exit exams. Faculty often emphasize the importance of academic rigor, while students may express concerns regarding the fairness and stress associated with high-stakes testing (Teshome, 2024). Engaging these stakeholders in the design process is essential for developing assessments that are perceived as valid and equitable. A participatory approach can help bridge gaps in understanding and foster a sense of ownership among all parties involved.

Impact on curriculum

The design of exit exams has significant implications for curriculum decisions. The review indicates that institutions may feel pressured to "teach to the test," which can narrow the curriculum and detract from broader educational goals. This phenomenon raises ethical concerns regarding the role of assessments in shaping educational experiences, as the focus may shift from holistic learning and critical thinking to merely passing an exam. Such narrowing of the curriculum can lead to a diminished educational experience for students, as important learning objectives may be sacrificed in favor of exam preparation. This raises critical questions about the overall educational philosophy of institutions and the extent to which assessments should dictate curriculum design.

In summary, the findings from this systematic literature review highlight the complexities and challenges associated with exit exams in higher education. While these assessments are intended to serve as valuable tools for evaluating student competencies, their effectiveness is often compromised by issues of validity, reliability, and the ethical implications of their design. Institutions must critically evaluate these challenges to ensure that exit exams not only measure knowledge accurately but also support an enriching educational environment that fosters student success and equity. Addressing these key issues will be essential for the future of exit exams in higher education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this systematic literature review highlights the critical design issues surrounding exit exams in higher education, emphasizing the need for valid, reliable, and equitable assessments. The findings underscore the importance of aligning exam content with educational objectives to ensure that these assessments accurately reflect student learning outcomes. Additionally, the tension between standardization and customization reveals the necessity of tailoring exit exams to the specific contexts of various academic programs, thereby addressing the diverse needs of students.

Stakeholder engagement is essential in the design process, as differing perspectives from faculty, students, and administrators can significantly impact the perception and effectiveness of exit exams. Moreover, the implications of exit exams on curriculum design raise ethical considerations that institutions must navigate carefully.

Future research should explore innovative assessment strategies and longitudinal studies to better understand the long-term effects of exit exams on student success and institutional practices. By adopting a collaborative approach and prioritizing inclusivity in assessment design, higher education institutions can enhance the validity and acceptance of exit exams, ultimately fostering a more supportive learning environment that promotes student achievement and educational equity.

The findings of this review suggest that a holistic approach to exit exam design is necessary. Institutions should prioritize collaboration among faculty, students, and administrators to ensure that exit exams are valid, reliable, and reflective of the institution's educational values. By fostering an environment of collaboration and open dialogue, institutions can create assessments that are both effective and supportive of student learning. Furthermore, ongoing training for faculty on assessment design can enhance the quality and efficacy of exit exams.

Future research should focus on innovative assessment designs that address the identified issues. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of exit exams on student outcomes and institutional practices would provide valuable insights. Research should also explore alternative assessment methods that could complement traditional exit exams, providing a more comprehensive evaluation of student competencies.

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