

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLE**The First University-based National Examination Management in Ethiopia: Stakeholders' Preparations**

Berhanu Nigussie Worku^{1*}, Kinde Getachew Abebe¹, Tekle Ferede Metaferia², Getachew Tilahun Wakene³, Frew Amsale Tesfaye⁴, Fisseha Mikre Weldemeskel¹, Ashenafi Belay Adugna², Netsanet Workneh Gidi⁵, Abel Worku Tassew⁶, Jemal Abafita Ababulgu⁷, and Nega Jibat Gemedo⁸

¹⁻⁸Jimma University, ¹ College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Department of Psychology

²College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of English Language and Literature

³College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Media and Communication Studies

⁴College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Department of Educational Planning and Management

⁵Institute of Health, Faculty of Medical Science, Department of Pediatrics and Child Health

⁶College of Business and Economics, Department of Accounting and Finance

⁷College of Business and Economics, Department of Economics

⁸College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Sociology

*Corresponding author: berhanu.nigussie18@gmail.com/berhanu.nigussie@ju.edu.et

ABSTRACT

To control the pressing concern of exam stealing and cheating among grade 12 students, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Educational Assessment and Examinations Service (EAES) decided to manage the Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESSLCE) at public universities since 2022. As this ESSLCE management practice is new in the country, it calls for scientific investigation to document evidence. Thus, the main objective of this study was to examine key stakeholders' preparations. An exploratory qualitative design was used. Regions and city administrations were sampled purposively, and the sampled regions' and city administrations' educational bureaus and universities were selected conveniently. Interview guides and document analysis forms were used as instruments of data collection. Sixty-three (63) officials and experts were interviewed, and four MoE's and EAES's documents were analysed. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The result revealed that the preparations made by key stakeholders such as the MoE, EAES, universities, invigilators, regional and city administration education bureaus, supervisors and students were not enough. Major reasons for the inadequacy of preparations were time pressure, budget constraints, security issues, limited resources, social media misinformation, limited awareness among students, students' parents and communities, transportation and accommodation problems, and lack of a standard operational manual. Document analysis result also showed preparations were made in the presence of the aforementioned problems. The MoE and EAES should prepare a standard manual with the active participation of all stakeholders. Also, necessary orientations, logistics and resources ought to be in place for ESSLCEs.

Keywords: Ethiopia; Management; National examination; Stakeholders' preparations; University-based

INTRODUCTION

The Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) is a certification obtained by students upon successful completion of examinations at the end of study at the secondary school level in some countries of the world (Bifwoli, 2020; Shauri, 2014). For example, in Ethiopia, students from social

and natural sciences streams sit for the Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESSLCE) which qualifies them for university study (Berhanu et al., 2023). This certificate is a document implying that the holder has fulfilled any secondary education requirements, including the passage of a final qualification examination. Evidently, the examination is the main route to accessing university and graduating from a university education (Yongbo, 2020; Davey, Lian & Higgins, 2007).

Undeniably, the execution of the secondary school leaving examination has a burden on students' learning experiences (Nguyen & Yooncheong, 2022). Thus, its management may have limitations and require systematic evidence for improvement. Accordingly, its fairness, objectivity, equity and efficiency that pertain to its management practices and results obtained need serious scrutiny (Nguyen & Yooncheong 2022, Yongbo, 2020; Davey, Lian & Higgins, 2007).

Specially in low- and middle-income countries, the examination system itself may encounter many challenges, because it is closely associated with the whole educational system, including curriculum, teachers, teaching and learning resources, pedagogy and beyond (Bhandari, 2017; Fleisch, Gultig, Allais & Maringe, 2019). This in turn is a major barrier to the quality of education. Furthermore, corruption and exam cheating are among the key challenges of exam administration that threaten academic standards and the quality of education. Academic cheating is an immoral and punishable activity, and it is a central issue for academic integrity (Khodaiea, Moghadamzadehb & Salehi, 2011; Solomon, 2017). Students' fear of failure and their parents' strong expectation of the students' success with less effort may contribute to examination malpractices. There are different forms of examination malpractices including impersonation, conniving with supervisors and school authorities to cheat, body-writing, falsification, cheating, and bribery (Jacob & Lar, 2001).

Other forms of cheating in the exam include writing answers on question papers and exchanging them with others to copy, communicating orally or through gestures, using a coding system to remember or recollect learned material, taking in already answered scripts and replacing them with the answer script given to them, text messaging, and taking away answer scripts or sheets from the examination room (Maheka et al., 2020). For instance, exam cheating in Nigeria involves an organized system of supervisors, invigilators, teachers, and in some cases, heads of schools (Omebe, 2014). Exam cheating was found to be one of the most noticeable and miserable crises of the education system with the consequences of having unqualified students who slip into universities which are catastrophic for the development of the country (Agwu et al., 2022; Ashiagbor, 2019; Bifwoli, 2020; Onyedinefu, 2019; Shauri, 2014).

In Ethiopian secondary schools, the majority of students are actively engaged in most academic cheating; their reasons are the low probability of being caught and the absence of severe punishment (Wondifraw, 2021). Research evidence reveals that cheating during examinations is triggered by peer influence, for it makes doing the right things unacceptable and things to be avoided like cheating seem right and acceptable (Diego, 2017). Students' cheating behaviors are larger when they are more homogeneous in terms of parental background characteristics and social ties (Claudio & Tonello, 2017; Kobayashi & Fukushima, 2012). The absence of a conducive examination room, the presence of social linkage, poor examination supervision, and parental pressure were predisposing factors for national examination cheating in Ethiopia (Badasa, Nuri & Gizaw, 2019).

There have been serious problems in managing secondary school leaving examinations both globally and nationally. For instance, in Ethiopia, some secondary schools deliberately prepare examination classrooms in the darkest locations, assigning irresponsible invigilators and supervisors, and purposefully misplacing sitting arrangements during examinations (Lemma & Menna, 2022). These examination malpractices are the best example of academic misconduct, which involve actions like attempting to gain or assist in others gaining or attempting to gain unfair academic advantages. It has close meaning with exam-cheating which can be interpreted as any attempt by a student to gain an unfair advantage in an examination by dishonest means such as communicating with another student in an examination, introducing unauthorized material into an examination including electronic devices and obtaining an examination paper in advance of its authorized release. This deep-rooted misconduct and exam-cheating practices could be due to a lack of academic integrity.

Besides, academic integrity is the commitment to act with honesty during academic studies, taking responsibility for own work, and respecting the rights of others' works. Academic integrity is closely related to good academic practice. Acting with academic integrity within the academic community is essential. Examinees and exam administrators must act with honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility in all academic activities including examinations. The proven way to protect and promote academic integrity is by taking action against academic misconduct (Harper Adams University, 2023; Khoo & Kang, 2022; Simola, 2017). Moreover, working on students' cognitive and moral development, ensuring examination security, and boosting students' learning and achievement were reported to be effective strategies to counter academic dishonesty and exam cheating (Lemma & Menna, 2022; Ray et al., 2018).

There is no question that the existing exam system had to be changed to control examination malpractices (Davey & Sha 2019; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2020; Lian & Higgins, 2007; Yongbo, 2020) and to bring quality to education. For secondary school leaving certificate examinations, changes in the setting, processing, securing, administering and beyond should be inevitable given the aforementioned grave examination malpractices (Fleisch et al., 2019; Shauri, 2014). Controlling exam cheating and reforming the exam system require collaborative efforts of all stakeholders in the education sector, for both short- and long-term outcomes (Agwu et al., 2022; Ashiagbor, 2019).

In 2022, to deal with the serious concern of exam stealing and cheating with regards to grade 12 national examination, the MoE and EAES decided to manage the ESSLCE at universities. Moreover, this new ESSLCE management presented major shifts about invigilators and supervisors' assignments, pre-exam preparations among all relevant stakeholders, and many more, to successfully manage the examination. As it may bring positive changes, this new approach can also put pressure on the Ministry, the universities, security staff, parents, students and other actors (Berhanu et al., 2023). For example, the students may travel long distances to reach the host universities which imposes financial, time and psychosocial costs combined with the inherent anxiety and stresses every national examination causes (Koramoah, Dzakadzie & Danyoh, 2022). Nevertheless, this ESSLCE management approach is new in Ethiopia and has been hardly studied. Involving as many and relevant stakeholders as possible across the different levels of governance structure to bring greater flexibility to the educational reform process, such as examination system reform, is very crucial (Snyder, 2013). Particularly, this part of the ESSLCE study project attempted to examine the pre-exam preparations made by the key stakeholders.

The general objective of this study was to explore the key stakeholders' pre-examination preparations. More specifically, it scrutinized preparations made prior to ESSLCE actual administration by the Ministry of Education (MoE); Educational Assessment and Examinations Service (EAES); hosting universities; invigilators; City Administrations and Regional state education bureaus; supervisors; and students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design

An exploratory qualitative design was used for this segment of the ESSLCE research project. The design helped secure qualitative data from the main stakeholders.

Target population

The target population of this section of the study project was different stakeholders, including top experts and officials from the MoE, EAES, regional and city administrations' education bureaus, students and parents of the students, current and previous invigilators and supervisors, officials selected from public universities across the country except for Tigray region, because of the war and security-related issues.

Samples and sampling techniques

Regions and city administrations were sampled purposively, and the sampled regions' and city administrations' educational bureaus and universities were selected conveniently, as presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Selected Regional Education Bureaus and Universities

Regions/Regional educational bureaus	Universities
Addis Ababa City Administration	Addis Ababa University
Benishangul Gumuz	Assossa University
Amhara Regional State-	Bahir Dar University
South Western Ethiopian Peoples Regional State	Bonga University
Dire Dawa City Administration and Harari Regional State	Dire Dawa University
Gambella Regional State	Gambella University
SNNPR and Sidama Regional State-	Hawassa University
Somali Regional State-	Jigjiga University
Oromiya Regional State:	Jimma University
Afar Regional State:	Semera University

For this study, 12 university officials, 10 university clinic health professionals, 10 regional education bureau officials and city administrations' educational bureaus, 10 regional assessment experts, 6 current invigilators, 3 current supervisors, 3 previous invigilators/supervisors, 3 students, 3 school directors and 2 EAES experts were interviewed; and four (4) MoE's and EAES's documents were critically reviewed. Even though the ESSLCEs were actually implemented at universities, the management processes including the key stakeholders' pre-exam preparations had started long before students arrived at their host universities to sit for the exams. That was why we attempted to include the exam management processes beyond the host universities' settings.

Data collection methods and instruments

Interview and document analysis (Desk review) methods were used to collect the data. Interview guides and document analysis forms were employed for the data collection. The interview guides were used for the 12 university officials, 10 university clinic health professionals, 10 regional education bureau officials and city administrations' educational bureaus, 10 regional assessment experts, 6 current invigilators, 3 current supervisors, 3 previous invigilators/supervisors, 3 students, 3 school directors and 2 EAES experts; whereas, the document analysis forms were used for the four MoE's and EAES's documents. Moreover, the instruments were developed by educational measurement and evaluation experts through critical literature review. After development, the instruments went through series of item-by-item discussions by panel of experts.

In addition, we assured and maintained the trustworthiness and credibility, among others, by using rigorous techniques to gather the data, triangulation, comprehensive data, thick description, saturation and external reviews. As much as possible, we selected credible participants and accurately represented their experiences.

Data analysis

The collected qualitative data were transcribed, translated and thematically analyzed. Coding, recoding, category and then themes emerged. Further, direct quotations or verbatim were used for data presentation in the analysis.

Ethical considerations

After critical evaluation of the research proposal entitled "*An Appraisal of and Lessons from the New Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination Management Processes*", the Ethical Review Board (ERB) of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Jimma University ethically cleared the project (CEBS 36/2015; 24/02/2015). Once the ethical clearance letter was obtained, a team of trained data collectors and supervisors was sent to the study sites to secure the

necessary data. Oral consent was secured from the study participants, participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the data were confidentially kept and used only for the intended purpose.

RESULTS

The pre-examination preparations made by the key stakeholders, i.e., the MoE, EAES, universities, invigilators, regional states' and city administrations' education bureaus, supervisors and students are presented in the following subsections.

Ministry of Education (MoE)

The decision to shift the ESSLCE management from schools to universities was made by the time Ethiopia was in a difficult situation in relation to the North-war and issues related to international relations (declined foreigner support). That is, the pre-examination preparations were made while the country was under arduous circumstances. "Before the final decision, a series of discussions had been conducted with pertinent federal and regional stakeholders. Such bold decision had been taken because bringing and maintaining quality education is a question of life and death in our country" (MoE's documents).

According to the Ministry, the universities also made necessary preparations, including the establishment of exam-centers task forces led by universities presidents, students' services task forces led by vice presidents for administration and development, centers, exam-administration task forces led by vice presidents for academic affairs, to host students in two rounds and manage the exams effectively. Similarly, the MoE established different task forces such as Federal Police exam-center task forces, regional and city administration level task forces and exam-administrators task forces. According to the MoE, students' placement was made at nearby universities to reduce the transportation cost; but university teachers were sent to universities located in other regions to invigilate the examinations objectively. The way students would be given orientation and receive meal and dormitory services at universities were arranged in collaboration with the host universities.

Actors of exam management and exam administration were identified by the MoE and EAES, structural and functional hierarchical relationships were defined, management power relationships were delineated, and respective roles and responsibilities were assigned to each actor with the view to ensure the examination security. Exam management and administration guidelines were prepared and shared among the stakeholders. Dos and don'ts were prescribed for each category of exam actors along with measures that would be taken if rules and regulations are violated. The exams were carefully prepared, stored and transported to the exam centers. More specifically, holding mobile phones would not be allowed for students; if they did, they would be automatically dismissed, and their examination results would be cancelled. The same restrictions and their consequences were imposed on invigilators. This decision was primarily made to prevent exam cheating. To prevent exam stealing (cyber-attack) and cheating, the MoE used computers not connected to the internet, assigned security guards for 24 hours to strictly look after the exams, and gave each exam six codes to help obstruct cheating. The security of exam-printing houses, printed examinations, their transportation and dissemination to centers were seriously taken care of.

Furthermore, the MoE sent letters to all universities in September 2022 stating the procedures and guidelines, among other things, about food menu for students, transportation, accommodation and payment for invigilators, exam station officers and center coordinators (who were allowed to enter campuses during the exam period with special ID prepared for this purpose and who would hold mobile phones). The operational manual sent to different stakeholders, including universities, also explicitly listed issues related to the rights and responsibilities of exam administrators, what was allowed in exam rooms and what was strictly forbidden, human resource types and numbers, and issues related to payments. These all were to control exam stealing and cheating, giving less emphasis to the rights and freedoms of the stakeholders involved.

Educational Assessment and Examinations Service (EAES)

One-hundred thirty-three (133) examination-center heads took full responsibility from the Educational Assessment and Examinations Service to manage the new ESSLCE. Similarly, among others, 133

exam-cluster center coordinators, 2,567 exam-station coordinators, 3,538 exam-supervisors and 18,490 invigilators were selected based on the criteria set in the draft guideline and their previous experiences to help successfully manage the examinations. The diagrammatical representation of the chain of command is given below:

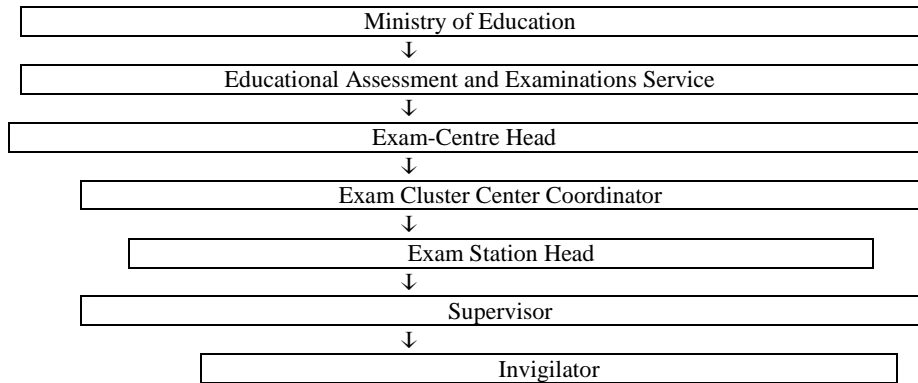


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the chain of command for ESSLCE administration

Universities

With the short time and limited resources they had, most universities reported that they made necessary pre-examination preparations - dormitories, cafeteria services, dining rooms, psychological advisory/counselling services, vehicles, human resources, clinical services, exam rooms including preparing enough chairs for the exam, arranging the chairs, posting the names of the students in front of their respective exam rooms, and assigning invigilators to each exam room. The universities made the necessary preparations by forming various task forces based on the guidelines given by the MoE and EAES. The following transcript indicates this:

Based on the guidelines given by the MoE and EAES, we prepared task forces from academic and non-academic staff to do the necessary preparations. For example, we organized and prepared a 24 hours' standby clinical task force at the university level and made basic medicines available in the stock of the university clinic. (University Official, UO 7)

UO 3 reported that they were very serious about the preparations: "After the formation of the task forces, firstly, jobs were done to make the directive clear, i.e., to clarify the essence of the directive and its restrictions. Based on the directive, we prepared our own action plan to perform the preparatory work".

UO 10 added:

We were ready to support students; we had additional ambulances, and we improved the status of the students' clinic with health professionals by collaborating with the university's medical school workers. We also organized a committee that consisted of members from the university, the regional education bureau and the duty hospital to attend to the students' health and wellbeing.

The pre-exam preparation regarding clinical services was done, according to a university clinic health professional (UCHP 7) for the following main reasons. First, the students came to the university from rural areas. Second, they were adolescents. Third, they might not have covered courses or missed a course during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conviction was that all these were likely to create anxiety in the students.

However, the pre-exam preparations were not without challenges in most universities. The following quotation says it all:

With regard to dormitory and cafeteria preparation, even the number of students that were allocated to us was beyond our normal holding capacity to enable them to stay for more

than a week. The classroom, security and medical team formation were challenging. To make this preparation more fruitful, we held a series of meetings every week with our key stakeholders, like the city administration municipality, education bureau, health bureau, hospital and security forces. (UO 5)

Although MoE said it had made the necessary pre-exam preparations by developing a manual, directives and guidelines for universities, the reality on the ground was the opposite, as depicted below:

To give you one example, the allowance given to the teachers who got engaged didn't have standardized guidelines until the 11th day though the exam was completed on the 12th day. Half of them had already left the university after invigilating the social science students. The others who stayed to invigilate natural science students also got informed about it on the last day. That means, it was on the last day that the last guideline came saying 'do this and that'. It was like a crisis management thing. When it was said that this had happened, they were saying 'do this as a solution'. When Jimma University said this had happened, they would share the tentative solutions for all universities based on Jimma's question since it was the first experience. The University of Gondar might ask something, and based on the possible response to that request, they would share that solution among all universities. For example, regarding allowance, they were saying that people would return by using what they came by (i.e., public transport) at first. The guideline they sent us at first says the mode of transport would be public buses. Then, after a while, they said that exam administrators could book flights. Therefore, the person who was assigned to a university in a region coming from another university in a different region using public transport, now started saying "Since the government had given permission, book me a plane ticket to Addis Ababa and a bus ticket from Addis Ababa to my place". Therefore, since there was no guideline that says work like this from the beginning, such things were challenging. By the way, most of the things that the MoE and EAES had assumed did not work. (UO 9)

Specially, the fact that the MoE requested the universities to get prepared to conduct the examination within a very short time put most of them under pressure such as the following:

...particularly, during the first round of administrating the exam, there were things for which we were not ready at all. For example, we should have prepared a bell or electric siren ahead, but we were not aware of that and no one told us to do this; so, we did not prepare it. The coordinators eventually told us that a bell was necessary, but it was already the eve of the exam commencement. It was a shocking experience. We tried to find it from wherever or even to purchase and get it ready for the next day, but it was so tough to make in that short period of time. So, at last, we used the sirens of ambulances for conducting the social science exam sessions, and we were able to avail it for the second round, for the natural science exam examination sessions. These kinds of things, we were making them available only during the last hours. (UO 1)

Invigilators

While planning to conduct a national examination approach like the new ESSLCE management, intensive and comprehensive training should have been given to examination administrators, such as invigilators well ahead of time by experienced experts in the area; failure to do so could have multifaceted negative consequences. As the interview result revealed, in the first university-based ESSLCE management, some invigilators did not take training or orientation on how to properly invigilate the exams: "Though I willingly applied to take part in the invigilation of the new exam management, I received no training or orientation; I just took part without any training or orientation on how to accomplish my responsibility" (Invigilator 1). Another invigilator added the following:

At the exam-center I was assigned to, there was neither training nor orientation offered to invigilators on how to execute their responsibilities as invigilators. Since I am an experienced educator, I successfully executed my responsibilities without the need for training or orientation. (Invigilator 3)

Regional State Education Bureaus

Most of the regional education bureaus made the pre-examination preparations, such as sensitizing schools to prepare students, arranging transportation for students and providing orientations for students and the local community, who were under serious pressure, ambivalence and fear. The following quote from a regional education bureau official reads as:

When we moved the students to universities, there was fear among the students and their parents. There were two emotions. We built a task force starting from the top to the woreda and schools. We provided guidance, and that task force had its own responsibilities. The team leader of that task force was the leader of the region. Because it needed security, there were transportation, security and police sectors. Even individuals having personal vehicles were forced to serve the public. The task force at every stage was led by the manager of that level; they worked together having minute documentation for every expected action. The other thing that needed social adjustment was that our sector was under a huge fear and pressure. There was doubt that we could not accomplish this task properly. The other was when we gave orientation for the community, there were two doubts among the students and their parents. The students who were self-confident and parents who had clever students supported us and agreed on its appropriateness. However, students who were not confident were not happy about this shift of exam-setting to universities. They also misinformed their parents as if the task aimed to fail students. There was a problem of politicizing the issue. (REBO 27)

Supervisors

Exam supervisors need to vigilantly ensure the security and integrity of the examination before, during and after its administration. Supervisors with no right kind of experience and training may fail to ensure the efficient and effective conduct of examinations. As clearly mentioned in the draft guideline and planned by EAES and MoE, the recruitment of supervisors was based on objective criteria and competition among potential supervisors from schools. However, enough orientation was not given for some supervisors. In relation to this, supervisor 4 said the following:

It was by competition. We competed with one another and finally I got the chance. I could not say that there were adequate orientations. The time was not adequate; the experience of the person who gave the orientation was also limited. To your surprise, there was no adequate time. The orientation was for an hour only; the discussion mainly focused on the poor reception we were offered, the per diem rate, and the like, rather than being an orientation on handling the exams.

Students

Obviously, both psychological and academic readiness are essential for students to be successful in examinations of any kind, leave alone a national certificate examination that follows a brand- new approach. Necessary orientation was not given to students in time to make them psychologically ready for the exams. The students were also not informed beforehand which contents to cover for the exams. The interview response of one of the student participants shows this: “Regarding the information provision on exam management, we had taken an orientation one day before the exam. We were not informed, and we did not get prepared for contents from grades 9 and 10 from our schools” (Student 2).

DISCUSSION

The MoE and EAES dispatched incomprehensively prepared manuals and guidelines to different stakeholders at the last moment. This made the proper exam preparations difficult for all key stakeholders involved. This finding is in discordance with the global best practices. The first resource that a state education agency makes available for examination administrators prior to the examination window opening is a matured, standardized and clear manual (Drane, 2023; Rwanda’s National Examination and School Inspection Authority, 2022; The South African Department of Education, 2023). This is mainly because a well-prepared exam management manual is exam administrators’ major reference to ensure that examinations run smoothly.

With regard to the current study, invigilators and supervisors complained that they did not receive proper training and orientation on how to manage the ESSLCE. Above all, exam administrators, and for that matter, anyone and everyone involved in the examination process must be appropriately trained for their role on how to properly administer the examinations. The training should be on all procedures, operational manuals and guidelines. It is best practice to provide the trainees with an agenda of topics to be covered, a copy of the PowerPoint or information to be discussed, exam security policies and procedures, guidelines, and/or oaths of certification forms relating to the prohibition of misconduct during the actual administration of national examinations and testing. These are helpful resources and great references to the exam administrators to effectively manage the examinations (Drane, 2023).

Moreover, the findings of the present study identified that some exam administrators including invigilators and supervisors managed the exams without sufficient or no training. The draft exam guidelines were also communicated to these exam administrators few days before the examinations, which might have hampered their adequate preparations. According to assessment/examination principles, it is imperative to communicate to the exam administrators that only exam administrators and delegates who have been suitably trained will be allowed to administer and proctor examinations during the administration. In Ethiopian context, such high standard may not be practical; but at least maximum efforts should have been employed to approximate the ideal standards. For example, exam administrators are supposed to read the exam administration manual thoroughly ahead of the actual exam administration to become familiar with the roles and responsibilities they will be required to discharge. Employing exam administration procedures is beneficial to both examinees or students and exam governing bodies, and strictly following exam administration guidelines increases consistency and exam security (Drane, 2023). In a condition where the ethical principles, rules and regulations for conducting examinations are diminished by key stakeholders such as teachers, education leaders, invigilators, supervisors and examinees, the validity and reliability of the examination results are endangered; it is the wrong handling of examinations that may bring examination malpractice. On the other hand, having responsible invigilators/supervisors, a conducive atmosphere for the conduct of the examinations, creating in the students' sense of responsibility and good study habits may result in good outcomes and ensure the quality of education. The findings of the present study regarding students' preparations for the exams were contrary to this principle.

Findings of the current study revealed that examinees' psychological and academic preparations were found to be poor due to a lack of appropriate and adequate orientation and guidance. Inadequate readiness for examinations can impact the examination preparation process and may cause concerns for students (Çırak, 2016; Minott, 2020). Being under a great deal of pressure to succeed in highly-competitive national examinations exerts a considerable amount of burden especially on low-performing examinees (Seddigh, Abdollahpour, Azarnik, Shariati & Keshavarz-Akhlaghi, 2016).

Summary of the major findings

Efforts of pre-exam preparations were made by different stakeholders, including the MoE and EAES, but were not adequate and participatory enough. For example, there was a significant delay in the planning and provision of guidelines and manuals from the Ministry; this in turn resulted in gaps, irregularities and inconveniences in the ESSLCE implementation.

In the process of the implementation of the new ESSLCE management, universities complained that the plan was top-down in which the roles of the universities were limited and their voices were hardly heard. There were also strong oppositions from university representatives to the process of the new ESSLCE management. Universities shouldered this huge responsibility without their full consent, limited time for preparation and in the absence of clear directions from the MoE about the details of the exam management activities. Sense of urgency and getting over burdened with exam management were common voices. Furthermore, we found out that the allocated budget sent to universities did not cover major costs. Universities were forced to expend their own budget for the ESSLCE management.

Regional education bureaus also reacted against the dominance of the MoE in making the decisions, disregarding their powers and essential roles. The bureaus also faced budget-related problems; this put them under serious pressure, uncertainty and frustration. Most of them doubted their capacity to accomplish the task properly. Furthermore, because of the lack of enough pre-exam preparations (including awareness raising), some students, community members and parents were politicizing the exam management approach because of misinformation; this added another burden on the bureaus.

Handling mechanisms of invigilators' and supervisors' accommodations and transportation were not also carefully worked out. The same was true with their per diem and session payments. Some invigilators did not take orientation on how to appropriately invigilate the exams; they discharged their responsibilities the way they thought was right. Moreover, enough orientation was not given for some supervisors, as it was with invigilators. It was revealed that the orientation time was very short (about an hour). The orientation contents focused more on poor reception, per diem rate and session payments rather than on how to manage the exams in the daunting new context, and the experience of the person who gave the orientation was limited.

Similarly, adequate orientations were not given to some students at some schools in time to enhance their psychological readiness for the exams; there was an instance where orientation was provided one day before the commencement of the examination. In addition, some schools did not inform their students whether to cover contents from grades 9 and 10 for the exams.

CONCLUSION

Although the MoE and EAES prepared quick manuals and guidelines and sent them to key stakeholders for the pre-ESSLCE preparations, it was difficult for many to make successful preparations given the time pressure, budget constraints, security issues, limited human and material resources, social media misinformation, limited awareness among students, students' parents and communities in general, and transportation and accommodation problems. Because of the lack of evidence-based decision-making and the top-down approach of the MoE and EAES, some of the things they assumed during pre-exam preparations did not work during the actual exam administration. On the final note, it should be understood that this study employed only qualitative approach, which could be considered as a methodological limitation; it would have been much better if the study used a mixed method.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of pre-exam preparations, recommendations are given for the main stakeholders of the ESSLCE in the following paragraphs.

The MoE and EAES ought to develop realistic manuals and guidelines in advance in collaboration with all key stakeholders for the effective management of the ESSLCE. Pressurizing stakeholders to do everything they are not ready for and are convinced about will do more harm than good to the examination processes and beyond. Moreover, enough time, budget and logistics should be given to primary stakeholders, for exam preparations, to prevent the future recurrence of crises and irregularities observed during the ESSLCE management in 2022.

Training and orientation must be provided by well-experienced professionals for those who will be involved in the ESSLCE management process, including for invigilators and supervisors. The training should be based on standardized procedures, manuals, guidelines and PowerPoints. Besides, secondary schools ought to seriously work on and orient their students to help them get ready for the examinations, both psycho-socially and academically. Regional education bureaus can do close supervision of the processes.

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