
FULL LENGTH ARTICLE**Key Lessons from the First University-Based Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination Management**

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the key lessons obtained from the first university-based Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESSLCE) management. The findings presented in the article are based on qualitative data (63 in-depth interviews) collected from purposively selected university officials (n = 12), university clinics' health professionals (n = 11), regional and city administration education bureau officials (n = 10), regional and city administration education bureau assessment experts (n = 10), invigilators (n = 9), and students (n = 3). Ministry of Education (MoE) and Educational Assessment and Examination Services (EAES) documents (n = 4) were chosen purposively and used as sources of data. The lessons obtained from the ESSLCE management in focus pertain to the entire nation, the key actors in the education system, students, parents, and implementing universities. Urgent focus on quality of education, evidence-based and well-worked out decisions, fitting plans, discussion and consensus, holistic and participatory actions, and further research are recommended for improved ESSLCE management in the future.

Keywords: Lessons/Management/Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination, University-based

INTRODUCTION

Educational Quality Assurance (EQA) has become an important endeavor world-wide (Creemers, 2015). For example, EQA is the most important concern for all regional accrediting agencies in the US (Ryan, 2015). EQA endeavors require substantial efforts on improving infrastructure, resources, course design, teaching-learning, and assessment and evaluation (Vlachopoulos, 2016). There are essentially different conceptions of Educational Quality (EQ). However, notably, it can be conceived from two perspectives (Barnet 1998, as cited in Ryan 2015). The first one is the conception of EQ as the tacit view of value and intellectual quality in academia while the second is the performance perspective of EQ. In the second conception, education is seen as a product with inputs and outputs.

The performance conception of EQ looks at education quality from input and output dimensions. The inputs can include infrastructure, resources, course design, and contents in the teaching-learning, while the product refers to the end-results (e.g. attainment of standards) of an educational program that are usually gauged through summative evaluation (Baht & Bhat, 2019). Summative evaluation helps to measure EQ through identifying the factors operating at different levels that can explain variations in students' achievement. Accordingly, Educational Effectiveness Research (EER) addresses the question of what works in education and why so, based on, among other things, evidences from summative

evaluations of student learning (Creemers, 2015). Therefore, summative evaluations (e.g. standardized national examinations) are useful educational quality-check mechanisms.

Thus, Standardized National Examination (SNEs), which are nation-wide Standardized Achievement Tests (SATs), provides important evidences for the evaluation of learning attainment and the level of education. Evidences from SNEs can augment tailored interventions, such as policy reform or policy formulation, targeted at improving EQ. Evidence-based decision is thus crucial in executing high-stakes standardized achievement tests (Gordon & Conaway, 2020), including the university-based ESSLCE in Ethiopia.

The first university-based ESSLCE was implemented in the 2021/22 academic year. This new phenomenon required huge investment of resources, encountered tremendous challenges, and triggered various concerns (Berhanu, 2023). However, due to the newness of the experience, research evidence is lacking about the different aspects of this examination management. Therefore, this article, in an attempt to fill one of the gaps, intends to convey the key lessons obtained from the first university-based ESSLCE management.

High-stakes national examinations, such as standardized achievement tests (SATs), glean crucial evidences about the quality of education in the whole system or part of it (Ryan, 2015). SATs help to generate evidence on the performance of schools, achievement of students, and similarities or discrepancies among schools in terms of meeting institutional, regional or national standards. In this case, standardized tests provide data that are used as EQ check and generate useful insights for decision-making (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2020).

Like-wise, Standardized National Examinations (SNEs), one form of SATs, have various purposes (Brown & John, 2012; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2020). Among other functions, evidences from SNEs are used to determine the quality of education; i.e. such evidences can be utilized as EQ check, leading to possible corrective interventions. They also have certification functions and help to control the various parties in the education system (teachers, students, schools, districts, etc.). Furthermore, SNEs can inform policy actions. These are explained in the following sections, in which SATs are viewed as subsuming SNEs, such as the ESSLCE.

Standardized achievement tests as education quality checks

Education is a key determinant of a nation's development (Mariana, 2015). Thus, a compromise in EQ can lead to an overall national crisis. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on EQ without neglecting coverage and equity. That is why the demand for EQ is increasingly growing globally. With the rise in the demand for EQ emerges a growing demand for Quality Assurance (QA) (Hou, 2012; Varonism, 2014). QA can be a forerunner in the endeavors exerted to achieve excellence in education. Therefore, substantial efforts should be made to ensure EQ using various quality check mechanisms. SATs are one way of generating evidences that are useful to check EQ in the education system or its specific components.

SATs are often summative evaluation tools that help in making decisions about student learning viz-a-viz institutional, national or international standards. They provide teachers, teacher educators, and educational decision-makers with the evidence about EQ, i.e. what worked well and what was proven wrong (Foorman, Fletcher, and Francis, 2019). Put differently, such tests provide data for impactful decisions that have long-term implications on EQ. Besides, according to Geiser and Santelices (2007), SATs provide evidences for improving curriculum and instruction, and hence serve as EQ checks. In other words, effective SATs can help to tackle limitations in the education system or its particular components (Hart et al., 2015).

Generally, SATs, including SNEs, generate evidences that the responsible bodies can use to evaluate EQ. That is, these tests can be used as quality checks to know the level of education in relation to its context and the set standards. Data from SATs can thus be used to devise appropriate interventions for improving EQ. To this effect, it is important to explore the implications of SATs, such as the key lessons from the first university-based ESSLCE.

Standardized achievement tests as certification schemes

SATs (SNEs included), can have a certification function (Foorman, Fletcher, and Francis, 2019). Besides serving as a scheme for selecting students for the next level of education, SATs can result in formal certification, which can help students to win scholarships or pursue careers. In other words, formal certification (e.g. a high school completion certificate) can enable students to access employment or career training. That means, students who have acquired certificates for completion of a particular academic program can further their education, pursue scholarship programs, or join the world of job.

SATs, such as SNEs, therefore, play an important role in determining students' future academic prospects (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2004). That is, SATs are used to make decisions on whether students should be promoted to the next level of education or have to be detained. Students who do not join the next ladder in the education system may be certified to pursue career training or seek job opportunities. For instance, in Ethiopia, ESSLCE results are used to screen students for admissions to universities. In sum, SNEs, or SATs in general, can determine, through certification schemes, students' academic and vocational directions. To make SATs effective in serving this purpose, evidence-based decisions are vital. To this end, it is useful to assess the input, process, and outcome of already administered SATs. This can involve exploring the key lessons that can be derived from SATs (e.g. ESSLCE).

Standardized achievement tests for higher-stakes decisions

Evidences from SATs can initiate higher-stakes decisions that go beyond the classroom instruction and immediate interventions meant to improve teaching and learning. Among such decisions are those related to accountability and policymaking. On the one hand, evidences from SATs can be used to endorse accountability measures (Hart et al., 2015; Foorman, Fletcher, and Francis, 2019). Data from SATs can enable controlling bodies to evaluate schools, districts, and other relevant groups, comparing their performances with pertinent standards (Sussan & Wilson, 2019). This is the function of SATs for accountability purposes, which in turn, impacts on EQ.

On the other hand, emphasis should be given for the use of evidence in policy-related decision-making. That is, SATs (e.g. SNEs) are among the sources of evidence for educational decision-making. Information from SATs can help to improve educational policymaking, which in turn, shapes instructional practices (Hess, 2022). According to Hess, SAT results provide education policy-makers with objective and comparable evidences about student performance, enabling them to judge schools and districts through a common measurement.

As discussed above, evidences from SATs can help to ensure accountably and provide a basis for policy formulation. Well-fitted accountability measures and suitable policy decisions help to improve EQ. Therefore, data from SATs, such as SNEs, should be gleaned and used cautiously so that lessons that fully serve the purposes of ensuring accountability and informing policy can be explored. However, research evidence is lacking concerning the lessons drawn from the first university-based Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (an SNE) management. Therefore, the objective of this article is to report research evidence on the key lessons that emerged from this grand new ESSLCE management.

Conceptual framework

The key lessons obtained from the first university-based ESSLCE management can be utilized as feedback for a better effect depending on the level of uptake from the concerned bodies (e.g. MoE and EAES). The presentation in this article is hence informed by the concept of 'feedback loop'. A definition of this concept goes as, "feedback loop is perceptual information, such as thoughts, feelings, and perceptions from the beneficiaries about the program, service, or product they have received" (Ahmadi, et al. 2021, p.21). Feedback loop is a cyclic procedure of obtaining feedback and using it to improve decision and practice. Feedback loops are two-directional undertakings that utilize inputs from two sides; namely, program/service receivers, i.e., beneficiaries, on one side and the program/service providers on the other. Feedback loops incorporate different but sequential steps (e.g. collecting data, analyzing the data, presenting and discussing the feedback with stakeholders, and taking practical measures based on the feedback to bring about improvements) (Whittle, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, this article attempts to communicate the key lessons derived from the first university-based ESSLCE management. Thus, data were obtained from key stakeholders (participants from the beneficiary side) and prominent lessons explored from the analysis, which will be conveyed to the providers (MoE and EAES) as feedback through, for example, publications and academic presentations. It is also hoped that the feedback will result in substantial uptake, i.e. the providers will make interventions (at practice, accountability, and policymaking levels) to improve the ESSLCE management in the future, which contributes a share to EQ. In summary, feedback loop is the conceptual framework (Figure 1) chosen to frame the presentation in this article.

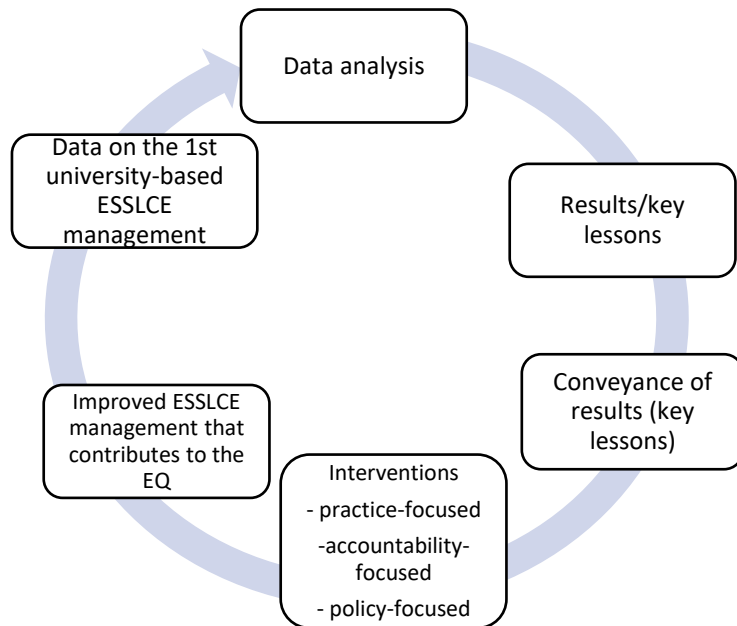


Figure 1: Conceptual framework as adapted from Ahmadi, et al. (2021, p.3)

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research design

The presentation in this article is based on a study that used qualitative survey design. The qualitative survey focuses on determining the diversity of views on the topic of interest among a specified population of study (Jansen, 2010; Busetto, et al 2020). Thus, as Jansen explains, the qualitative survey does not aim to count the number of people with the same characteristics. Instead, it intends to establish the meaningful variation (pertinent aspects and values) within the study population, and centers on the exploration of meaning patterns, views, experiences, etc. Overall, a qualitative survey research is designed to interpret notions (e.g. experiences, ideas, and opinions) holistically and deeply (Jansen, 2010).

Sources of data

As highlighted before, the findings reported in this article are based on data gathered from University Officials (UOs), University Clinics' Health Professionals (UCHPs), Educational Bureau Officials (REBOs), Education Bureau Assessment Experts (REAEs), invigilators, and students. In addition, four MoE and EAES documents were used as sources of data. Accordingly, initially, eight regional states (all regional states except Tigray) and two city administrations were included in the study purposively. Then, educational bureaus and universities in the capitals of the regional states and city administrations were chosen through convenient sampling method. Along with this, educational bureau officials and assessment experts (one each) were recruited purposively. Then, a total of 63 in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants; and four key documents of the MoE and the EAES were

analyzed. More specifically, 12 university officials, 11 university clinics' health professionals, eight regional education bureau officials, two city administration education bureau officials, eight regional educational bureau assessment experts, two city administration education bureau assessment experts, six current invigilators, three previous invigilators, three students, and four official documents were used as sources of data.

Data collection instruments

Ample qualitative data were gathered from the participants via in-depth **semi-structured** interviews and document analyses. Semi-structured interview was chosen for it provides an opportunity for interviewers to obtain answers to open-ended questions, allows for generating deeper insights, and permits easier analysis compared to unstructured interview. The data collection instruments were hence interview guides and document analysis checklists. Because interviews were conducted with six groups of participants (university officials, university clinics' health professionals, education bureau officials, education bureau assessment experts, invigilators, and students), six interview guides were used. The interview guides and the document analysis checklists were designed based on the objectives of the study and insights gained from the literature review.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Amharic and later translated into English during data transcription. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the data were transcribed verbatim. The participants were coded using abbreviations such as UO1, UCHP 2, REBU 2, etc. Data were collected from April 7- April 17, 2023.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers should guarantee the trustworthiness of their studies. To this end, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criterion of trustworthiness (credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability) were applied in the study communicated in this article. Accordingly, to confirm the credibility (the extent to which the result are trusted) of the study, ample and well-interpreted data were used. Secondly, to strengthen the dependability (the clarity of the research methodology) of the study, clear methodological descriptions were provided. Thirdly, to improve the conformability (neutrality) of the study, efforts were made to ensure that the data analysis and interpretation represent the research participants' ideas and are free of any bias. Finally, to ascertain the transferability (applicability to other contexts) of the study, thick descriptions of the methods and processes were presented.

Methods of data analysis

Qualitative data require qualitative analysis. Thus, the data from which the findings in this article derived were analyzed thematically. Thematic Analysis (TA) is "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.2). According to Ibrahim (2012) and Dawadi (2020), by looking for patterns of meaning (themes) within a qualitative dataset, TA enables investigators to identify and make sense of recurring issues and patterns of meanings. Accordingly, datasets were first studied carefully to arrive at general understanding. Next, subsequent data inspection and coding were carried out. Following this, from the codes and further codes, meaning categories and sub-categories were identified. Resultantly, thematic analysis was carried out.

Ethical considerations

In this study, data were gleaned and utilized in observance of ethical principles. In the first place, ethical clearance was acquired from the Ethical Review Board of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at Jimma University (CEBS 36/2015). Following this, support letters were submitted to the target offices of the universities and educational bureaus in focus. Then, after permissions were obtained, the aim, methods, and procedures of the study were explained to the study participants. Besides, to ensure anonymity, codes were used instead of personal identifiers. Oral consent was also received from the participants, who were recruited voluntarily. Interviews were scheduled and conducted in consultation with the participants on the relevant matters. Eventually, data were gathered prudently from the right sources and the findings reported honestly.

RESULTS

Some key lessons were obtained from the first university-based ESSLCE management. One of these is a cross-cutting lesson while the other lessons concern the various stakeholders (MoE, educational bureau officials, school managers, students, parents, and implementing universities). These are detailed in the following sections:

Cross-cutting lesson

Some participants (e.g. UO 1) said that the process and results of the first university-based ESSLCE management left behind a cross-cutting lesson that the Ethiopian nation can count on. According to these participants, the decision passed to administer the examination in universities was bold and ambitious, inviting many questions regarding its feasibility. However, as they emphasized, due to the strong coordination and harmony among the various actors, the commendable collaborative actions that were taken, and the great commitment of the concerned, the goal was achieved successfully. This is captured in the following excerpt:

To tell the truth, there was frustration initially concerning whether it would be possible to administer the examination in universities to a huge number of students. However, later on, because we worked cooperatively and in unison, first nationally and second as a region, we were able to ... administer the examination to about 200,000 students regionally. We learned from this that there is nothing that we can't do nationally if we work cooperatively. We can even do much greater work! (REBO 24)

As depicted in the above transcript, although there were inevitable initial frustrations regarding the practicality of the new examination management, a successful accomplishment was registered eventually, and in effect, the goal was achieved. This was so because of the cooperative and committed engagements of the respective actors. It is thus understood from the transcript that the lesson gained from the process and accomplishment of this project was considered as impactful nationally. The following transcript taken from the EAES document also strengthens this conviction:

It [the university-based ESSLCE management] helped us to see that we can mobilize a huge national workforce. We have learned that if our universities are managed well and have the commitment to carry out the tasks they are entrusted with, they have the potential to be mobilized for great missions. We can accordingly trust that they can register big results. We have seen that we have the capacity to register huge results. (EAES Implementation Manual, August 2022)

The cooperative and committed efforts that were made by the various actors were also emphasized by another participant. According to this participant, the different actors were highly committed and worked collaboratively to realize the goal of the examination. This assessment is in tandem with what was said before regarding the decisive roles the different implementers played for the successful achievement that left behind a vital lesson for the nation. The response of this participant is presented below:

The experience I got from the new exam management practice was that every stakeholder stands against the exam cheating issue. Citizens are highly committed to avoid the problem. There was collaboration among supervisors, invigilators, and security bodies. There was a highly concerted effort made by everybody involved. I think there was a high commitment from all involved in the exam management. (Current Supervisor 5)

Generally, the bold determination taken by the MoE to administer the examination in universities, the concerted efforts that were later exerted, the collaborative actions that were demonstrated, and the results that were registered seem to have been emanated from a grave concern over the deteriorated quality of education. All the efforts were targeted towards one goal – improving the quality of education through controlling exam cheating and its concomitants, a common national goal. The following text seems to focus on these points:

With respect to quality, I suggest to continue the new practice so as to minimize cheating behavior. If the exam management continues like this, meaning to bring the right people to university to attend their...education properly, I think we will have good citizens for the country. As a result of the previous education system, incompetent and immature people could be the members of the cabinet, leaders of the country; there are lots of people who assume different positions either by nepotism, or corruption. So, these people hurt the community when they talk, they do not consider the feelings of the community, they usually use rude words, motivate people in wrong directions rather than leading them to proper directions. If mature and competent people assume the leading positions, we could continue as a nation. I think, competent professionals could provide a solution to the multi-faceted problems the country has faced currently. (Previous Invigilator 5)

Lessons for educational actors

Among the key lessons obtained were those which pertain to the various actors in the education system (MoE, educational bureau officials, school managers, and teachers). These lessons can be categorized into those which pertain to the status of education in Ethiopia, resource planning, scheduling, and other pertinent activities.

The status of education

All the participants expressed concern about the deteriorated status of education in Ethiopia. They explained that this problem was clearly shown as the results of the first university-based ESSLCE management. The responses also go to the extent of stressing that those in the system who did not fulfil their responsibilities effectively should be held accountable: "The decline of student performance indicates the failures of teachers; teachers will remain accountable" (Current Invigilator 3). The following excerpt, taken from a university official, also points to the fact that the new exam management revealed the deteriorated status of our education:

One lesson it gave us is related with the quality of education. We now know about what the level of the students is, and what the education system looks like. We are by now able to know what our problems are. We have understood the way education is being run in Ethiopia. It has well revealed all the signs. It has well identified the very signs of Ethiopia's education system and told us where we are. We have observed how much quality has been compromised. We were shocked up on seeing the results. Many people were surprised with the results. This is the result we have gained. We could never deny; it is impossible to deny this. ... It has given us the result that will help the Ministry of Education to revise the educational system of the country. This has come as a result of administrating the exam this way. (UO 1)

It can be noted from the above transcript that there is a bold concern that the educational performance of our students is low and that the problem is attributable to setbacks in the education system, including the way education is managed. This view was also shared across different respondents: "There are health professionals who are not able to inject a needle properly because of cheating; there are teachers who are not capable of teaching properly; ... it is questionable how they got their degrees...", (Previous Invigilator 5); "The first opportunity is that we are able to know the status of our general education system; it is fortunate that we are now able to know the status of our students, the level of our education system, and the severity of the challenges the education system is facing (REBO 28); "For students who depend on academic dishonesty/cheating, I feel that the new exam management lays a foundation; there will be a shift among students from expecting answers from some sources during examination to reading and learning;" (Supervisor 1); "I suggest that to ensure education quality, it [cheating] must be minimized...", (a student participant); and "There was a good management system because we know our ability and every person will get what he has done; there was no cheating at all" (a student participant).

As discussed in a preceding section, the new examination management was effective in achieving its primary objectives, i.e. reducing exam stealing and cheating. Likewise, a good number of participants emphasized its effectiveness considering that all the challenges encountered before, during, and after the examination as inevitable, given this huge national project. The following transcript can be taken as an example:

The new practice should continue because the objective is to have students who qualify with quantity and quality. The new system discourages cheating among the weak students and promotes students' interest towards education. Earlier, students had been tempted to cheat rather than rely on themselves as if "cheating was born with them". Most of the students would depend on two or three students in a class to cheat. The clever students had also been affected by having a sense of carrying the responsibilities of weak students. (Previous Invigilator 1)

The theme of the above transcript appears to be that the new examination management effectively reduced cheating, which had highly compromised the quality of education in Ethiopia. Therefore, the participant viewed the new examination management as effective in achieving its primary goal. The lesson gained from the experience is thus that this huge national project was worth implementing. This belief is also reflected below:

The society's understanding of the role of examination is important. This is the issue of cultivating a generation. It will help the nation to get out of many existing problems. We have to cultivate a generation which can lead the country knowledgeably. This is a first attempt, and thus, individuals will be treated by their merits (without cheating). Not all students should go to universities; based on their capacities, they can join technical and craft training institutes. There is a need to create a condition that helps to treat all individuals based on their merits, and the role of the school in this regard is very much desirable. (MoE, Press Release, 2022)

It is evident from the above text that the new exam management was meant to reduce exam stealing and cheating, which had been spoiling the generation by compromising the quality of education. The text also implies that the new exam management was one step forward in cultivating the new generation in the right manner. This claim is also supported by the following transcript:

We learned or understood from this exam what our generation looks like. The new generation gives less attention to education and has developed the idea of cheating as a habit or a legal means to pass examinations. But this exam management practice has effectively indicated that cheating does not continue in the future. It is also good or positive that the government has taken it as an evidence to understand the status of the generation. (REBO 21)

The above transcript, taken from REBO 21, also implies that lessons were gained about the possibility of controlling exam stealing and cheating through the new ESSLCE management. However, although several of the participants (including REBO 21) believed that lessons were drawn to show that cheating, which is a national menace to quality of education, can be reduced through the new examination management (MOE also believes so), a few participants expressed views contrary to this. For example, the following transcript entails this belief:

... cheating is not controlled by gathering students at one center. Rather, it is possible to control or minimize it while the students are at their schools. For example, it is possible to minimize cheating by diversifying the exam type, using computerizing systems, setting strong rules and regulations, raising the awareness of political leaders and the society about the roles of education and examination. Do other countries gather students and give exams to minimize cheating. I don't think. (REBO 23)

REBO 23 suggested ways of controlling or minimizing exam cheating (diversifying the exam type, using computer technology, setting strong rules and regulations, and awareness-creation) rather than concentrating students in one center, which he/she believes cannot help to control cheating. While this stand point can be contentious, given contextual factors, a good number of student participants, in one way or another, supported this view. For example, these responses are illustrative cases: "Quality keeping should not be only on exam but also should include teaching system in schools," (a student participant); "Work on the quality of teaching and learning before examination," (a 2nd student participant); "School teaching quality needs to be improved," (a 3rd student participant); "Attention to school system need to be given priority" (the 2nd student participant,); and "... but improve school teaching system and teaching resources" (the 3rd student participant).

Especially, the students' responses cited above suggest that more focus should be given to the process of education than to its end product. This view is also reflected in the following lines:

The first lesson is that we have to work on the process of education. That is, we shouldn't simply focus on the results of students and promotion rates that are computed at classroom and school levels. We shouldn't simply focus on and reward the statistics as well as school and class level academic results. In some instances, we need to have externally administered exams. For schools, we might have exams prepared at the woreda levels. For instance, if we want to reward schools based on the Grade 8 exam results, the exam should be prepared independently, and the administration should be very rigorous and secured (by external bodies), and a system that minimizes cheating should be introduced. This way, we will promote excellence and quality teaching and learning, which help to change our schools. (REBO 31)

Overall, although most of the participants gave affirmative responses, different lessons seem to have been learnt concerning the possibility of reducing exam cheating through the new ESSLCE management. This, along with other related factors, could have led to the opposite views about the continuation of this exam management approach. However, all the participants agreed that the first university-based ESSLCE management revealed the disaster in the quality of education in Ethiopia, and they labelled this as one of the key lessons drawn from this ESSLCE management. Although this is the overarching perspective, the following questions can be raised:

1. Why had we not been aware of the crisis in our education earlier?
2. Why should we obtain a bitter **awareness** in a bitter way, i.e. as a result of a shocking rate of student failure?

Resource planning

Notable lessons were also obtained from the first university-based ESSLCE management regarding resource (material, human, financial, and technical) planning, which have direct implications for future actions. In fact, these lessons were the results of the setbacks that were observed ESSLCE management in focus as depicted in this response: "It is better to work earlier to minimize the challenges that we faced in the last year's exam administration, because the environment in which they [students] are examined, read and eat may have a negative impact on their achievement" (UO 5). This is also highlighted in the following responses: "The lesson we learnt from this challenge is related to transportation, budget, taskforce, and psychological problems created on the students' and their families. We got a lot of lesson from this round. For the next round, we think we can manage those problems in a better way," (REBO 28); and "Students didn't have enough time to study the environment such as the exam rooms, and this was likely to affect capable students; so, these drawbacks have to be corrected" (REAE 24).

Responses from several participants indicated that the implementation of huge projects like the new ESSLCE management should be based, among other things, on adequate pre-planning of resources. For example, a regional education bureau assessment expert explained: "As an organization, we also learned that, to undertake this huge project that aims to improve the quality of education, we have to make adequate preparations in recruiting and allocating human resources, making other resources, such as transportation available, and making ready all the necessary budget..." (REAE 14), while another participant put it as: "There should be national policy and guidelines regarding assessment and evaluation in general, and ESSLCE management in particular" (REAE 25). Similarly, another participant pointed out: "We need to make preparations prior to the exam administration, and adequate budget should be allotted to ensure the effectiveness of the system," (REAE 31) while another participant said: "There were human resource-related problems that should have been solved ahead of time by the concerned bodies" (REAE 29). The following text also captures these views:

The lesson we learnt from this challenge is related to transportation, budget, taskforce, and psychological problems created on the students' and their families [which should have been planned carefully and which need meticulous planning in the future]. We have got a lot of lesson from this round. For the next round, we think we can manage those problems in a better way. We have formed strategic

team in our office for the administration wing; to strengthen our organizational relation, we have done structural analysis. It has been structured starting from region to schools and has been explained for the stakeholders. (REBO 28)

The above responses seem to capitalize the need for efficient pre-planning of resources (logistics, human, financial, and technical). The responses also imply that the problems that were faced in the previous ESSLCE management would not have occurred if fitting prior resource planning had been made. This suggests that good lessons were drawn from the previous drawbacks regarding resource planning. These lessons are useful if the same or similar ESSLCE management is to be implemented in the future.

Awareness-creation

One of the reasons for the challenges faced during the implementation of the first university-based ESSLCE management was the lack of awareness and readiness among students and parents, which created worries, stress and anxiety among them: “One is, as I mentioned earlier, both parents and students were not ready to accept the idea that the students should move to universities to take the exam. It took us long to persuade them...” (REBO 1). The next responses are also related to this one: “The people were not in favor of the new practice because they wanted that their children join universities easily,” (REAE 30); and “Many things need improvement; first, the psychology of the students and parents,” (a student respondent). This calls for awareness-creation activities, in the future, as explicated in the excerpt below:

Another lesson is that we need to prepare our students psychologically. From now on, we need to work on psychologically empowering our students to be ready for the new exam setting. Because if they are ready and if they read and study properly, they can pass. The Federal Government has to learn from the previous time and make appropriate financial and material preparations to carry out the exam by taking lessons from the previous experience. (REBO 31)

The above text implies that awareness-creation and orientations are vital so that students can be psychologically prepared for the examination and parents become ready to willingly send their children to new exam centers (if required). As indicated earlier, this is a lesson derived from the weaknesses encountered in the new ESSLCE management, as reiterated in this quote: “In fact, we faced difficult challenges to convince parents and students for this new exam administration practice. Parents were frustrated and felt insecure to let their children travel to distant places for taking the ESSLCE. We hope that this problem will be resolved in the future” (EAES 2).

Evidence-based measures

Terse experiences can lead to fitting measures, and the first university-based ESSLCE management may not be an exception. Accordingly, the following quote emphasizes that this exam management triggered thoughts of evidence-based measures:

The basic lessons taken from the new exam management practices were that it empowered us on how to perform such type of big exam management project with our local human resources and with all its challenges, i.e. it has given us good lessons regarding how we should manage it in terms of transport and financial preparations. (EAES, Implementation Report, August 2022)

The above transcript implies that the EAES has started planning to execute similar examinations more effectively. It follows that the lessons derived from the first university-based ESSLCE management compelled some educational actors to start to take practical measures. In fact, the measures are not the same across actors. Some started discussions on the steps necessary to make students self-reliant academically. Others began evaluating themselves and alerting students towards hard work, which leads to success, as emphasized in the following quote:

If you ask me what is gained this year due to this approach, I would say that it has made schools return back home and start evaluating themselves. There would no more be promoting cheating, any more from now on; now schools, parents, and students have all understood that. No more! We are now telling this to students of grades 6 and 8. That is, there won't be any practice of this kind [cheating]. So, one key lesson we

all have got is that it has given this awareness.... From now on, students have to get themselves ready to take the exam confidently. (REBO 26)

Yet, others took the issue further and started doing more concrete activities. One of such activities is following the same trend in managing the Grade 8 Regional Examination. In this case, examination clusters were created, and students would be transported to these clusters, instead of being examined in their schools:

Therefore, this year, we do not examine grade 8 students in elementary schools. Instead, we plan to examine in high school clusters. We will move students to the clustered high schools. Last year, we distributed the management of the exam to 9,375 schools, which becomes a reason for unethical practices. But, this year, we clustered the schools and the exam is going to be given in 1,100 schools, and we have planned to use high school teachers as invigilators. (REBO 28)

Moreover, school supervision and accountability measures were other more practical actions that were taken. These were done on the ground that those involved in the management of education and those who are directly engaged in teaching should be accountable for the educational failures that are experienced. It is explained in the excerpt below:

There must be some sort of responsibility and accountability among the critical stakeholders. In this regard, there are growing tendencies among teachers, principals, students, and parents to take the responsibility for the learning of students. The schools, the teachers, and the principals are responsible for preparing the students as per the learning standards. ... If the students are well-prepared and meet the minimum learning standards, it will not be an issue whether the examinations are given in secondary schools or universities. The schools, the woredas, or zones are expected to identify the status of their students, to lead their students to the expected levels of performances, to set goals for their respective units (e.g. schools, woredas), and to identify students who will be able to do exams by themselves as per the set standards. (REBO 31)

Evidence-based practical actions that were undertaken are also highlighted in the following transcript:

Recently, we have tried to supervise schools to see how the teaching and learning is going on and how the secondary schools are preparing their students for this year's national exam. ... We have learned that teachers are well aware of the problems in the teaching and learning process. We then have agreed that every teacher should take the responsibility for the learning of his/her students according to the learning goals. Now schools and teachers are working on students by identifying their levels of performances, and the schools have clear plans in this regard. Moreover, the new system has created a sense of responsibility among schools in that schools that are not able to prepare students to meet the minimum standard and fail to register adequate results will be made accountable. (REBO 31)

A similar scenario is observed in the text quoted below:

Further, in our region, one lesson is, um, we identified our schools well. Previously, um, recently, in February, there was a general meeting in which woreda, zonal, and regional officials as well as the directors and supervisors of 650 secondary schools participated. In the meeting, universities presented reports, and we assessed the overall accomplishment to understand the gravity of the problem and why it happened. The main reason is failure to do the right work in the lower levels. As such, 57 of our 650 secondary schools did not have a single student who passed the examination. This happened because the director didn't do his job properly; because the concerned bodies didn't do their jobs properly. ... As a result, warning letters were written and some [school directors and supervisors] were removed from their positions. This compelled them [school personnel] to concentrate on their work. It created a sense of accountability and showed us where we are. (REBO 24)

Lessons for students

Students also learned useful lessons from the first university-based ESSLCE management. To put it specifically, some students understood that exam cheating would no more be possible, and in effect, began working hard on their education. In other words, these students began to take appropriate measures, one of which is attentive class attendance:

Currently, my students started attending their lessons seriously while I am teaching because they feel that this practice will be continuing in the future. ... they didn't follow their education seriously in previous time, they sit for exam, and even though they had been absent frequently, they would copy answers from relatively clever students. For this reason, I believe it [the university-based ESSLCE management] lays a foundation to fight against such ill-practices. (Current Supervisor 1)

Another practical measure that students were taking is studying hard since they would be required to work on their own on the ESSLCE. According to one participant, the small number of students who succeeded in passing in the first university-based ESSLCE compelled prospective exam-takers to study hard to become successful:

Again, since only students who got 50% and above directly joined universities, it resulted in the observance of examination-related principles. Those who got below 50% entered universities for remedial programs. The main thing, however, is that it encouraged students to study. They have understood that cheating is no longer useful and that they have to study hard. Thus, seen comparatively, students have now begun to study; they have begun to read, and cutting classes ... has reduced. It is good in that it has compelled our students to study. (REBO 24)

On the other hand, clever students became aware that it is time for each student to become self-reliant. That is, the efforts that they exert on their schooling are valued. This awareness boots their motivation to study and their confidence in their abilities. This is explicated in students' responses stated as: "Administering exam like this is very important for only students who study hard, can do well and pass," (a student participant); and "The management system was very interesting because students who work independently can work freely," (another student participant). This is also supported by an assessment expert who said: "We learned a lot of lessons from the new exam management practice; in the first place, it helped some students to develop self-confidence in their capacity of doing on exams" (REAE 29). Besides, the following quote elaborates more on this point and adds more other actions that students started taking:

Our students' motivation to learn is completely improved. The change of our students' motivation to learn is a good opportunity for us. The indicators of this change are: students do not miss class; students ask teachers to give them tutorial class at weekends; ask teachers to do worksheets; compel the teachers to provide summary notes; report to the school directors about the teachers who do not teach, and insist that this kind of teachers be changed. (REBO 28)

Lessons for parents

Parents had been initially skeptical about the trustworthiness of the first university-based ESSLCE management, the safety of their children while traveling to and from the exam centers, and the security of the same in the centers. However, eventually, it appears that they obtained two major lessons. The first is the need for extending their roles for the success in the education of their children. In other words, it was found that parents, as a result of understanding that their children have to be self-reliant in school work, started critically following up how the latter were being treated in schools. For example, in one regional state, parents began to control teachers, as articulated in the following transcript:

In addition, the community is also creating pressure on the teachers, who are not responsible for their teaching task. This is because one of the reasons for the failure of the students is lack of teachers' follow up. In addition, the community started to pressure the school board and parents' committee to follow up teachers. The students inform their parents the way the teachers teach them, and if the teachers are not doing their job properly, those parents convinced community representatives in the school to solve the problem before it becomes the reason for the failure of students. (REBO 28)

The above excerpt implies that the public started supporting endeavors intended to alleviate the problems in the education system. In connection with this, the EAES also assertively acknowledged that the first university-based ESSLCE management showed that the public were supportive of the Government's efforts aimed at mitigating these problems, including defective examination management (EAES, Implementation Manual, August 2022). It was also found that, due to the first university-based ESSLCE management, the nation in general and parents in particular understood that the education system seemed to be emerging as a system that can be trusted. The following responses make this fact clear: "... parents also developed trust on the government to take their children to examination centers and returning them to their homes safely," (REAE 29); and "... it showed that this examination approach has been acceptable among the public because it created a cheating-free exam administration scenario and enabled their children to become self-dependent," (REBO 24). This is in agreement with the EAES's conviction that the lack of trust among the public on the MoE created due to exam mismanagement, prior to the ESSLCE management in focus, gave way to trust and confidence (AES, Implementation Manual, August 2022).

However, the above findings are based on data obtained from indirect sources who expressed views based on the parents' actions. The evidences could have been more comprehensive, rigorous, and sound if data had been generated from parents themselves. Since the impacts of this this grand project, the university-based ESSLCE management, can be far-reaching, further studies can address this issue by generating data from students' parents.

Lessons for universities

Study participants from the implementing universities believed that they obtained vital lessons from the first university-based ESSLCE management. According to one participant, among other things, the experience enabled them to deeply understand the challenges education in Ethiopia is suffering from so that they can be expected to actively engage in finding solutions:

In addition, it was useful to make universities aware of the problem. It is a big issue! I don't think they had been aware of this problem to this level before. It gave universities a big lesson about the kind of citizens we are producing and the type of students who are joining universities. This helps them to become part of the solution, part of the solution! (REBO 24)

In a related manner, one participant felt that the universities were then aware of the background to the compromised quality of education in such a way that they are expected to be prepared to recruit their would-be students and educate them properly to produce competent graduates. This view is reflected in the participant's utterances stated as: "I believe it has given a lesson as to how universities should accept students from now on. I believe that universities have to screen the students whom they will admit. To maintain the quality, universities have to give entrance exams and admit better students.... (UO 1)

The first university-based ESSLCE management was also claimed to have helped universities to self-assess, i.e. to become aware of their potentials. This is explained in one response as:

The lesson that we have taken enabled us to be confident that we can accomplish such type of mission and that we can deliver appropriate service if the university brings more than this assignment. Previously, we were limiting ourselves, but now, we realized that our capability of doing is more than this. (UCHP 5)

Similarly, one participant emphasized that universities can accomplish more than what they are achieving now. Emphasis is thus made in the respondent's utterances, below, that the "impossibility" becomes a possibility and the hard task achievable if universities stretch beyond what they are supposed to perform:

I think the lesson is that there is nothing impossible; everything is possible.... First, we were a bit worried. We asked "how could this be practically possible?" We thought it would be a bit challenging. This was worrying us much. When they said some 174 rooms were required, I requested the registrar office how many rooms they had.... And, they said "We have some 60 or so". This was

worrisome. But then, when they said that we had to get it ready from whatsoever, we started searching spaces from library, laboratory, and a building under construction, ..., and halls. And, it has happened! So, sometimes, instead of saying 'No', we need to exercise saying 'It is possible'. It has made me think this way. The big lesson is that we have recognized that the university has a lot of resources, and the staff is also ready to work to the utmost level. (UO 1)

It was also reflected that the pressure exerted on service providers in universities also taught them to develop senses of collaboration and preparedness to respond to repeated healthcare seeking tendencies. The testing time they passed due to high caseloads was thus an opportunity for them to exercise perseverance and responsiveness. This is the essence of the following text:

As clinic service providers, we have understood how to treat emergency cases and how to give services under difficult situations as well as how to overcome challenges. We also understood that preparation is essential for accomplishing every activity. If we had not been prepared through discussing all aspects of the task, we would not have been able to overcome [the huge caseloads]. All the concerned bodies, including the president, gave much attention to the students' services; so, when we called them, they gave us responses immediately. When every member of the clinic made a call, he/she could get responses. Therefore, when there are problems, it is necessary to be alert, and I understood that collaboration is vital to overcome problems. (UCHP 5)

DISCUSSION

This article looked into the key lessons obtained from the first university-based ESSLCE management. It was shown that due to the strong coordination, commitment, and harmony among the various actors, the goal of this huge project (exam stealing and exam cheating) was attained. This suggests that seemingly ambitious national projects can be accomplished through concerted and committed efforts (an important cross-cutting lesson). The new ESSLCE management was primarily implemented to bring about Educational Quality (EQ) by controlling examination mismanagement. Obviously, education quality assurance should follow holistic and participatory approaches (Schreiner, 2005). Therefore, the high commitment and active participation of the various actors demonstrated during the first-university-based ESSLCE management can be scaled up for more concerted actions geared towards improving EQ. Thus, it is necessary to work on the inputs, processes, and product of education instead of focusing on the end-results alone (Foorman, Fletcher, and Francis, 2019).

Other key lessons were also reported, which the various actors in the education system (e.g. the MoE, EAES, educational bureau officials, school managers, and teachers), students, parents, invigilators, and implementing universities can utilize to take tailed practical actions in the future. In some instances, students began to give attention to their education with the view to becoming self-reliant in their school work. School-based measures aimed to improve EQ, stakeholder discussions targeted towards this end, and accountability actions were also initiated based on the lessons (feedback) obtained from the ESSLCE management in focus. These responses are in line with the views that SATs provided useful evidences that can serve as EQ checks (Hou, 2012; Varonism, 2014) and provide insights for higher-stakes decisions, such as accountability-focused and policy-related decisions (Sussan & Wilson, 2019; Hess, 2022).

Generally, different parties claimed that they derived useful lessons from the first university-based ESSLCE management. These lessons can be used as feedback to make appropriate decisions and initiate corrective interventions (at practice, accountability, and policy levels), which can have positive impacts on EQ in general and the quality of the teaching-learning process in particular. This view is in line with the notion of educational assessment as an enabler of evidence-based decisions. This is captured in Kellaghan and Greaney's (2020) work, which acknowledges the vital role standardized public examinations play in facilitating various level decisions. Therefore, ample care should be taken in the management of high-stakes SATs (Demir & Keleş, 2021), including the ESSLCE, and the lessons that can be drawn from the process should be used appropriately.

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of the huge nation-wide project, the first university-based ESSLCE management, showed that it is possible to accomplish seemingly ambitious national projects with available resources but through committed decisions and concerted efforts. However, it has also been learned that the multi-faceted challenges encountered in the implementation of the examination could have been minimized through careful planning, adequate prior preparation, awareness-creation, and evidence-based decision. All stakeholders also became well aware of the deteriorated status of education. This awareness thus triggered evidence-based decisions and actions that are being undertaken, and will possibly continue to be undertaken, by the different groups of society (e.g. educational bureau officials, students, and parents). Universities also recognized their potentials of accomplishing huge missions, missions that they are not meant for. It was also learned that there exist contentious views about the need for sustaining the university-based ESSLCE management, with the majority favoring the administration of the examination in local centers using technologies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are forwarded:

- The deteriorated Educational Quality (EQ) requires urgent attention and should be top on the agenda of the MoE. Huge investments of resources and professional skills are crucial to revitalize quality in education in Ethiopia.
- Evidence-based decisions, well-worked out and fitting plans, discussions and consensus, and holistic and participatory actions are essential for better ESSLCE management in the future.
- This study included not all the possible data sources. Thus, further studies, with rigorous methods, which utilize data from more sources (e.g. lower-level education bureau officials, teachers, school leaders, parents, community representatives, and individual or group cases) are required.

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