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A Move towards Choosing a Workable National Examination Management Approach for Ethiopia: Empirical Evidences to Inform Policy Actions

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Abstract

Effective management of university entrance national examinations is vital for a country. This appraisal of the processes, results, and lessons of a new, university-based examination management approach that was recently experimented in Ethiopia is intended to generate evidences for policy actions. It is also a step towards the selection of a workable national examination management approach for the country given the current university-based one is provisional. Mixed methods research approach involving interviews, surveys, and review of secondary data was used. Data were collected from diverse stakeholders. It was found that the approach was relevant and effective but inefficient and less feasible. Short-term actions for the improvement of this examination management approach are recommended as immediate solutions. However, choosing a context-fit workable national examination management approach for Ethiopia, among the identified possible alternatives, requires further investigation.

Keywords: /Ethiopia/Examination cheating/Examination management approach/ National examination/Policy/

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[1] Conceptualized idea; the details of the authors is given at the back of the manuscript.

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1. Introduction

University entrance national examination is of high importance for a country; hence, its management merits much attention of stakeholders (Davey, Lian & Higgins, 2007; Yongbo, 2020; Nguyen & Yooncheong, 2022). There are different forms of examination malpractices (Jacob and Lar, 2001; Maheka et al., 2020), and examination cheating is one among the key challenges of examination administration (Khodaiea, Moghadamzadehb & Salehi, 2011; Solomon, 2017). Examination cheating infiltrates unqualified candidates to universities, which is catastrophic for the development of a country (Shauri, 2014; Bifwoli, 2020). Examination cheating is partly triggered by peer influence (Diego, 2017). According to Omebe (2014), examination cheating may involve an organized system of supervisors, invigilators, teachers and heads of schools. Homogeneous characteristics of parental background and social ties (Claudio & Tonello, 2017), absence of conducive examination room, poor examination supervision, and parental pressure are predisposing factors for cheating in national examinations (Badasa, Nuri, & Gizaw, 2019). As a result, control of examination malpractice is a never-ending battle (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2020), and its management approach, like any other educational programs, is subject to change (Davey et al., 2007; Yongbo, 2020).

Since recently, managing the Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examinations (ESSLCE) has become tough because of the increasing examination cheating (Wondifraw, 2021). In response, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced a new approach to manage the ESSLCE in which public universities are used as examination centers; about one million students have taken the examination. Given the new approach involved radical shifts in the examination administration approach processes, its effectiveness, efficiency, feasibility and challenges are not certainly known. Therefore, we examined the processes and results of, and the lessons obtained from the new examination management approach based on evidence drawn from key stakeholders and secondary sources.

2. Methods and Materials

Concurrent mixed method design was used in this study. Different stakeholders including participants from Educational Assessment and Evaluations Service (EAES), regional/city administration education bureaus, students, current and previous invigilators and supervisors, school directors, and representatives of all public universities except universities in Tigray Region were sources of data. Purposive and convenient sampling techniques were used for selecting the study participants. Accordingly, 63 in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected participants; and four key documents from the MoE were analyzed. Besides, 938 students from Jimma Town, using availability sampling method, were surveyed. Pre-tested standardized adjustment and examination anxiety scales, open-ended questionnaire, interview/FGD guides, and document analysis checklist were used in data collection. The project proposal was ethically approved by Jimma University's Institutional Review Board, and a team of trained data collectors and supervisors generated the data. ATLAS.ti, SPSS and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data.

3. Major Findings

3.1 Processes of the New Examination Management Approach

Searching for a new examination management approach that led to the university-based national examination administration was a need-based intervention as an immediate solution to manage examination cheating and stealing that have become a chronic problem in Ethiopia. However, there were strong concerns from the stakeholders about its implementation processes. Universities and regional education bureaus complained that the plan was top-down under the dominance of the MoE, their roles were limited, and their voices were hardly heard. They also criticized that the decisions making processes disregarded their roles and responsibilities. There were also not enough pre-examination preparations by the stakeholders including the MoE.

Several challenges were faced in the examination management processes, and all the key stakeholders were challenged due to their participation in the program. Among others, there were irregularities in examination administration because of paramount psychological and environmental factors affecting the students; many of them experienced mental instability, test anxiety, stress, depression, and expectation crisis. Students' negative attitudes towards the new examination management, health problems, disturbances around dormitories and examination rooms, physical attacks from security personnel, intimidations on capable students, and sexual harassment against females were also among the challenges. The universities, the regional/city administration education bureaus, the MoE and EAES, the invigilators and supervisors, and the students' parents were also challenged severely. Universities, for example, faced resource limitations, difficulties in service provision, human and material provisions and disruption of their core functions (teaching-learning, research, and community services). Regional education bureaus faced budget limitation and difficulty in facilitating transportation services. Invigilators and supervisors encountered deficient logistics provisions including transportation problems, poor accommodations, and insufficient incentives. Students' parents were frustrated about the safety of their children because of different rumors and misinformation.

3.2 Results of the Examination Approach

Fighting with the examination stealing and cheating has become a national agenda and attracted much attention of the stakeholders. Representatives of nearly all stakeholders believed that a new national examination management is quite necessary for Ethiopia. Justifications for seeking a new examination management mostly stem from the retrospective evaluations of the past defective practices of national examination management and the subsequent negative results on the quality of education and beyond. The new examination management approach was found effective and relevant, but less feasible and inefficient. No examination **s**tealing/theft were reported, and examination cheating was significantly reduced although attempts of and some actual cheating were reported. The approach was inefficient because huge resources and much time were invested by different stakeholders. Examinee-wastage was also evident as more than 17,000 students boycotted the examination during the first round because of various reasons. The approach did not seem socio-economically feasible. Several and difficult challenges facing different stakeholders, as presented in the preceding section, are important indicators. Moreover, the technical capabilities of the MoE, the EAES, the education bureaus, and the universities did not meet the requirements of the examination. Similar limitations

were observed pertinent to pedagogical feasibility. Parents were exposed to unexpected costs and suffered from tensions about the safety of their children. Students had to travel to new compounds where they were struck by psychological strains and suffered from adjustment problems, which could have negatively affected their performances on the examinations.

3.3 Lessons Learned

Explicit and emergent lessons were drawn from the new examination management approach. The former refers to useful experiences obtained that the study participants articulately expressed in their responses, and the latter are lessons that were not explicitly stated by study participants as lessons, but emerged from data analysis as issues that have illuminating effects. These are described below:

3.4 Explicit Lessons

The MoE, EAES, educational bureau officials, universities, school managers and teachers have got deeper understanding about the failed status of education in Ethiopia, the critical need for careful planning and forecasting budget, time and other resources, and awareness-creation before putting such demanding projects into effect. Based on the lessons obtained, some regional education bureaus and offices have reportedly begun to effect evidence-based measures such as discussions and consultations on how to make students academically self-reliant. Self-evaluations and accountability measures have begun among some stakeholders, (e.g. writing warning letters plus removing school directors and supervisors from their positions), alerting students towards useful methods that lead to success, and, a region decided to follow a similar approach in administering the Grade 8 Examination. Universities have become aware of their potentials to achieve national missions like this. Students have also learned that examination cheating is no longer possible, and in effect, some students have begun working seriously on their education including regularly attending classes, demanding for better instruction plus studying hard, and putting pressure on less hard-working and less responsible teachers. Parents became aware of the changing situation in the ESSLCE management that resulted in the revitalization of their roles in the education of their children and understood that their children have to be self-reliant in school work. Hence, some parents began critically following up how their children are being treated at schools.

3.5 Emergent Lessons

There have been deep concerns over the quality of education among the key stakeholders. Yet, the majority of the study participants believe that over-reliance on examination control alone as a method of education quality assurance is not sound. This throws the lesson that holistic and systemic approach has to be devised to curb the problem the education system in Ethiopian is undergoing. High school teachers' beliefs of being deprived of their rights to participate as invigilators and supervisors, regional/city administration officials' concerns about their participation being confined to transporting students, few students' claims of mistreatment (e.g., gross disqualification of their results due to ungrounded reasons, and university support staff's reports of inconsistent payment execution) are among the claims of differential treatment. Attribution of setbacks experienced during the examination process to pitfalls in pre-planning, commendable commitment from all actors, the application of context-driven solutions (e.g., spiritual remedies such as holy water for students'

illnesses), the need for research-based decision, and the utilization of coercive measures (on some invigilators and transporters), which could have negatively affected the quality of service, were lessons generated from the study.

4. Conclusions

- There was support among the key stakeholders for seeking a new ESSLCE management, examination malpractices (stealing and cheating) being the main reasons for the support. The new ESSLCE management has attracted much attention and become a national agenda for its positive and negative aspects.

- Because of the lack of evidence-based and the top-down approach decision making processes of the MoE and EAES, some of the expectations and standards assumed during pre-examination preparations did not work during the actual examination administration. Although manuals, guidelines, and letters were prepared and disseminated by MoE and EAES to the stakeholders, it was difficult for many to ensure successful examination management. Time pressure, budget constraints, security problems, limited human and material resources, misinformation, limited awareness among students and parents, and transportation and accommodation problems were the critical hindrances.

- The health, transportation, and safety-related problems many students encountered were serious. Some students were not comfortable with the food, dormitory and other services, and the overall environment of the towns/universities in which they took the examination. Students had limited time for adjusting themselves to the new environments and the examination management that was characterized by strict control. Many students suffered from homesickness; they lacked concentration and motivation to complete the examinations. Examination anxiety and stress were so prevalent; and there were reports of intimidation, physical attack and sexual harassment. Negative emotional states, adjustment problems, sleep deprivation, distractions, and lack of wellness might have greatly affected the examinees' examination performances.

- The new ESSLCE management appears to have been effective in eliminating examination stealing and significantly reducing cheating. It is also viewed as relevant by the majority of the study participants. However, its feasibility and efficiency remain questionable.

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5.   Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for Short Term Actions

Based on gaps identified in the first university-based examination management, we recommend the following issues to be addressed for the upcoming examination management:

1. Necessary precautions should be taken by the MoE and EAES when justifying the necessity of a new examination management whereby the past, present and future scenarios are fairly presented, and in a way institutional unity and integrations are maintained. Hence, the university staff should be trusted to handle the examination administration in their work places.
2. Robust and participatory planning approaches should be considered by the MoE and EAES.
3. Professionalism, not only administrative and security-oriented decisions, should be given due consideration in the management of examinations. The actual examination administration should be scientifically guided with regards to students' adjustment, assignment of invigilators and supervisors, and control of the examination settings. To address the physical illness, psychological distress and adjustment problems among students, adequate mentoring services should be provided by professionals.
4. Students', supervisors' and invigilators' mobility should be conducted in ways that unnecessary fatigue, psychosocial strains, financial and life losses are avoided or significantly reduced. Serious measures, especially by MoE and EAES, should be taken to reduce the excessive economic cost of the examination management by reducing unnecessary mobility of students, invigilators and supervisors.
5. Maximum efforts should be exerted to eliminate or significantly decrease causalities, intimidations, verbal and physical attacks, sexual harassment and other acts that are threats to the safety and security of the students, invigilators and supervisors. Relevant measures should be taken to ensure that all examinees sit for all examinations.
6. Effectiveness obtained in eliminating examination stealing and reducing cheating should be maintained through concerted efforts of the key actors in the examination management. Furthermore, there ought to be legal consequences against people involved in examination stealing and cheating. This requires communicating and implementing policies, rules and regulations pertaining to examination management.
7. The MoE should seriously consider how to maintain and improve stakeholders' cooperation which may include addressing unsettled matters in the past experience like budget allocation for the key implementers, and fair payment of incentives for supportive staff, invigilators and transport service providers.
8. The university-based examination management practice as an experiment needs to be continuously evaluated. The lessons drawn from the evaluation should be used as inputs to improve the subsequent examination management until the most effective, efficient and contextually feasible approach will be identified.

5.2 Recommendations for Long-term Actions

This study recommends four (4) possible alternatives to be considered for selection as an endorsed workable approach given the current university-based examination management is just an experiment.

Alternative 1: Reconsidering the previous school-based examination management with improvement;
In this case, the closest university should be given the responsibility of managing the examination by assigning invigilators and supervisors. To change attitudes and behaviors of actors engaging in examination stealing and cheating, corrective measures should be taken without compromising control involving security bodies. Yet, there is a concern: what if the past bad practices come back?

Alternative 2: Sustaining the current university-based examination management with modifications;
In this alternative, universities should continue serving as examination centers addressing drawbacks of the past. For example, invigilators and supervisors should not be assigned to universities far away from their workplace for logistic, professional, social and political reasons. Transporting students should be meticulously planned and carefully managed to avoid threats like life loss and injury due to road traffic accidents and armed forces. Besides, all the recommendations for short-term actions presented above are applicable to this alternative. However, feasibility and efficiency of the approach can be questioned.

Alternative 3: Introducing technology-based examination management;
Technology-intensive examination management is recommended to significantly avoid examination stealing and cheating. It also avoids the massive transportation of students far away from their home environments and hence the subsequent consequences. Nevertheless, there are reservations about the applicability of this alternative due to the limited infrastructure and facilities that are available and the high cost of providing digital devices for the increasingly large number of students.

Alternative 4: Shifting to university entrance examination without conducting a national examination;
This is replacing the national examination with entrance examinations prepared and administered by universities. It eliminates examination management-induced pedagogical problems, logistic/infrastructure limitations and huge costs. Students will be certified for completing grade 12 and apply to universities of their interest for admission. It requires creating competitive and autonomous universities to responsibly and rationally manage their entrance examinations. However, doubts are raised against this alternative such as lack of standardized national examination in the country at present and whether universities could effectively manage the entrance examination.

Finally, which one of the four alternatives to adopt? The selection of the most appropriate examination management approach for the country needs further investigations to ensure evidence-based decisions.

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Authors' contributions

A. 1-9 coceptualized the research issue and drafted the methodlogy.
B. 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, and 11 anlyzed the data and accomplished the write up.
C. 1, 2, 3, 7, 10, and 11 prepared the manuscript.
D. All authors have read and agreed to the publication of the short communication.

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Competing of Interest
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Consent for publication
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