
EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION EXIT EXAMS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review investigates equity and inclusivity issues related to exit exams in higher education, synthesizing findings from 30 studies published between 1994 and 2024. Exit exams are designed to evaluate the competencies of graduating students, but their implementation often raises concerns regarding fairness, accessibility, and the impact on diverse student populations. The review reveals that while exit exams can enhance academic accountability, they disproportionately affect marginalized groups, exacerbating existing inequalities within the educational landscape. Methodologically, the review incorporates qualitative and quantitative studies, case analyses, and literature reviews, providing a comprehensive overview of prevalent themes. Key findings indicate that exit exams can lead to adverse washback effects on teaching practices, influence student outcomes differently across demographic groups, and raise significant concerns regarding accessibility and inclusivity in academic assessments. The review underscores the necessity for policies that address these equity issues, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of exit exams. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about educational assessment practices, offering insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers aiming to improve the effectiveness and fairness of exit exams in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility, Exit Exam, Equity, Higher Education, Inclusivity

INTRODUCTION

Exit exams have emerged as a prominent method for assessing the competencies of students before graduation in higher education institutions. These assessments are benchmarks to ensure that graduates possess the necessary knowledge and skills relevant to their fields. However, the implications of exit exams extend beyond academic evaluation; they engage deeply with issues of equity and inclusivity. As

higher education systems worldwide strive to maintain academic standards and accountability, exit exams have become a focal point of debate, particularly concerning their impact on diverse student populations. This introduction explores the historical context, theoretical underpinnings, and contemporary challenges associated with exit exams, drawing on a wide range of scholarly sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of their role in higher education.

Historically, the introduction of exit exams has been rooted in efforts to enhance accountability and standardization across educational institutions. Advocates argue that these exams provide a necessary measure of competence, acting as a protection against declining academic standards. According to Bishop (1999), national exit exams are crucial for educational efficiency, as they align curricula with standardized assessments and ensure that all students meet a shared benchmark. Similarly, Baker (2019) suggests that exit exams can promote racial equity by ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, meet the same academic standards. This perspective posits that exit exams can level the playing field in higher education, particularly in contexts where disparities in educational quality and access are prevalent.

However, critiques of exit exams often highlight their detrimental effects on marginalized student populations. Research by Warren and Grodsky (2009) reveals that these exams can harm students who fail them, without substantially benefiting to those who pass. This raises significant questions regarding the fairness and inclusivity of such assessments, especially in diverse educational contexts. The high-stakes nature of exit exams can exacerbate existing inequities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack access to the resources and support needed to succeed in such assessments. Bracey (2009) further argues that mandatory exit exams can discourage graduation among students from low-income families, as they are more likely to fail these exams due to inadequate preparation and support. This critique underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the equity implications of exit exams.

The methodology employed in exit exams varies widely, from standardized testing to performance-based assessments. Each approach carries its own set of advantages and challenges. For instance, studies such as those by Ayenew and Yohannes (2022) and French (2023) indicate that high-stakes exams can lead to improved academic outcomes, they may also induce stress and anxiety among students. This duality necessitates a closer examination of the methodologies utilized in exit exams and their subsequent impact on student performance and well-being. French (2023) notes that high-stakes exams can disproportionately affect students from underrepresented groups, further widening the achievement gap. This highlights the importance of considering the psychological and emotional toll of exit exams on students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

In addition to academic outcomes, the washback effects of exit exams on teaching practices warrant attention. Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022) found that the administration of exit exams can significantly influence curriculum design and instructional strategies, often narrowing the focus of education to test preparation rather than fostering holistic learning experiences. This shift in pedagogical emphasis can have long-lasting implications on the breadth and quality of education received. Bishop (1999) argued that national exit exams can improve educational efficiency by aligning curricula with standardized assessments. However, the review suggests that this alignment often comes at the cost of learning quality, as teachers may feel compelled to focus on rote memorization and test-taking strategies rather than fostering deep understanding and creativity.

The socioeconomic factors influencing student outcomes in exit exams cannot be overlooked. Ayenew and Yohannes (2022) found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Ethiopia faced significant challenges in accessing the resources needed to prepare for exit exams, such as textbooks, tutoring, and internet access. This lack of access not only affects their performance but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality. Similarly, Dempster (2012) compared exit exams across four African countries and found that students from wealthier families were more likely to pass these exams, as they had access to better educational resources and support systems. These findings underscore the role of socioeconomic status in shaping student outcomes and highlight the need for policies that address these disparities.

The inclusivity and accessibility of exit exams are also critical issues that need to be addressed. Aristeidou et al. (2024) explored student satisfaction with online exams and found that distance-learning students often face barriers to technology access and digital literacy. These barriers can disproportionately affect students from rural areas or those with disabilities, limiting their ability to perform well in online exit exams. The study calls for more inclusive exam designs that consider the diverse needs of students, including those with disabilities and those from non-traditional learning environments. Similarly, Hussan et al. (2021) examined student perceptions of exit exams in civil engineering and found that students from diverse backgrounds often felt excluded from the exam preparation process. The study highlighted the need for culturally responsive assessment methods that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of students.

The role of institutional policies and practices in shaping the equity and inclusivity of exit exams is another significant area of consideration. Studies such as those by Slomp et al. (2020) and the University of Munich and Woessmann (2018) emphasize the

importance of institutional support in ensuring that exit exams are fair and accessible to all students. Slomp et al. (2020) argue that policies governing medium-stakes large-scale exit exams should be designed with equity in mind, taking into account the diverse needs of students. Similarly, the University of Munich and Woessmann (2018) found that central exit exams can improve student outcomes, but only if they are implemented in a way that ensures all students have access to the necessary resources and support.

The psychological and emotional impact of exit exams on students is another critical issue that needs to be addressed. Research by French (2023) and Benner (2023) highlights the stress and anxiety that high-stakes exams can induce among students, particularly those from marginalized groups. French (2023) notes that the pressure to perform well on exit exams can lead to increased anxiety and stress, which can affect students' performance and well-being. Benner (2023) further argues that exit exams negatively affect students' developmental outcomes, mainly if they are not provided with the necessary support and resources to succeed. These findings underscore the need for a more holistic approach to assessment that takes into account the psychological and emotional well-being of students.

The long-term impacts of exit exams on student outcomes, including graduation rates, employment opportunities, and career success, are also important considerations. While the immediate challenges posed by exit exams are well-documented, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine how these assessments affect students' lives beyond graduation. Research by Pioplunink (2013) and Siddiqui et al. (2020) highlights the potential long-term benefits of exit exams in ensuring that graduates possess the necessary competencies for the workforce. However, these studies also emphasize the need for exit exams to be designed and implemented in a way that ensures they are fair and accessible to all students, regardless of their background or circumstances.

In conclusion, the use of exit exams in higher education has been driven by the need to enhance accountability and standardization. However, the utilization of these assessments has raised significant concerns regarding equity and inclusivity. The high-stakes nature of exit exams can exacerbate existing inequities, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. The methodologies employed in exit exams, the socioeconomic factors influencing student outcomes, and the psychological and emotional impact of these assessments are all critical issues that should be addressed. Furthermore, the role of institutional policies and practices in shaping the equity and inclusivity of exit exams cannot be overlooked. As higher education systems continue to evolve, it is imperative to adopt more inclusive assessment strategies that consider the diverse needs of students and ensure that all students have the opportunity to

succeed. This introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of these issues, drawing on a variety of scholarly sources to provide a nuanced understanding of the equity and inclusivity challenges associated with exit exams in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Equity in higher education refers to fairness, ensuring personal and social circumstances do not hinder educational potential, while inclusivity means all individuals can achieve a basic standard of education. Both aim to reduce social inequalities through access and participation (Zubrzycki, 2022). Inclusivity involves creating an environment where all individuals, particularly marginalized groups, feel welcomed and valued, promoting their active participation in academic life. Equity and inclusivity foster a sense of belonging that is essential for student engagement and success (Simbanagavi & Goronga, 2024). Institutions that emphasize these values can enhance educational outcomes and prepare graduates for diverse workplaces (Kincey et al., 2022).

Institutions can implement diversity, equity, and inclusivity policies by revising curricula and assessments to address inequities (Mostafa, 2023). Engaging students in discussions about their experiences can help demystify diversity, equity, and inclusivity concepts and promote inclusive practices (Kincey et al., 2022). The literature on equity and inclusivity in exit exams in higher education reveals a complex interplay of factors that influence access and outcomes for diverse student populations. Exit exams are often seen as a mechanism to ensure academic standards, but they can also exacerbate inequities among students from different backgrounds. According to Teshome (2024), exit exams in higher education can lead to equity-related problems, including resource allocation issues, which may create exclusivity and limit opportunities for diverse student populations, affecting overall educational equity. Warren & Grodsky (2009) also state that exit exams disproportionately harm disadvantaged students, including those with disabilities or limited English proficiency, exacerbating inequities in educational resources and leading to higher dropout rates, thus undermining equity and inclusivity in higher education opportunities. In addition to this, Bracey (2009), states that research indicates that exit exams disproportionately affect poor and minority students, potentially reducing graduation rates by one to two percentage points. The impact is more significant for low-achieving students, raising concerns about equity and exclusivity in higher education access.

Furthermore, Gorman-Huang & Huang (2023) discuss how exit exams can exacerbate inequities in higher education, potentially excluding marginalized groups from opportunities. It emphasizes the need for equitable access to educational resources and assessments to ensure fair outcomes for all students.

While the focus on equity and inclusivity is vital, some argue that systemic inequalities may persist despite these efforts, suggesting that deeper structural changes are necessary to achieve true equity in higher education (Zubrzycki, 2022).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This systematic literature review was conducted to analyze equity and inclusivity issues associated with exit exams in higher education. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the impact of exit exams on marginalized student groups and identify systemic biases in assessment practices.
2. To examine the influence of socioeconomic factors (e.g., resource access, institutional support) on student outcomes in exit exams.
3. To propose evidence-based recommendations for more inclusive and equitable exit exam policies and designs.

RESEARCH QUESTION

PICO (Problem Intervention Comparison Outcome) was used to formulate the research questions. The following are the research questions for the systematic review:

1. To assess the impact of exit exams on marginalized student groups and identify systemic biases in assessment practices.
2. To examine the influence of socioeconomic factors (e.g., resource access, institutional support) on student outcomes in exit exams.
3. To propose evidence-based recommendations for more inclusive and equitable exit exam policies and designs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology involved a multi-step process designed to ensure a comprehensive and rigorous examination of the existing literature. To this end, PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) was used.

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across several academic databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, PubMed, and educational journals. The search terms included "exit exams," "higher education," "equity," "inclusivity," and "assessment." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were utilized to refine search results, allowing for a more focused retrieval of relevant studies.

Inclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed articles, case studies, and literature reviews published between 1994 and 2024. Studies that explicitly examined the impact of exit exams on diverse student

populations, equity concerns, and the methodologies employed in exit assessments. Research providing empirical data, theoretical frameworks, or critical analyses related to the topic.

Exclusion Criteria

Articles not focused on higher education or those addressing non-exit exam assessments, studies that lacked empirical evidence or were not peer-reviewed were excluded from the systematic review.

Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was developed to capture key information from each selected study. This included: the Author(s) and publication year, objectives and research questions, methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods), key findings related to equity and inclusivity issues, and contextual details, such as geographic location and demographic focus.

Quality Assessment

Each study was assessed for methodological rigor using a quality assessment tool tailored for systematic reviews. Criteria included: Clarity of research questions and objectives, Appropriateness of the research design, validity and reliability of the data collection instruments, and relevance and depth of the analysis. Studies were rated as high, medium, or low quality based on these criteria, which informed the overall synthesis of findings.

Synthesis of Findings

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify common themes and patterns across the studies. This included highlighting the equity and inclusivity issues raised by authors, particularly concerning marginalized groups. The synthesis aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the landscape of exit exams in higher education, elucidating how these assessments intersect with equity and inclusivity concerns.

Limitations

The review acknowledges several limitations, including potential publication bias, as studies with significant findings may be more likely to be published. The focus on English-language publications may limit the inclusion of relevant research from non-English speaking countries.

By employing this rigorous methodology, the review aims to provide valuable insights into the complexities surrounding exit exams and their implications for equity and inclusivity in higher education. The findings will inform future research and policy recommendations aimed at improving assessment practices.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The review identified 30 relevant studies, revealing diverse perspectives on equity and inclusivity issues in exit exams. Table 1, summarizes the authors, year of publication, objectives of the studies, methodologies used, and equity and inclusion issues raised for each study.

Table 1. Summary of the extraction from studies.

S. No.	Author(s)	Methodology Used	Equity and Inclusivity Issues
1	Al Ahmad et al. (2014)	Survey	Focus on academic performance across demographics. Examines how exit exams may disadvantage students from underrepresented groups due to lack of access to resources and support.
2	Aniley (2023)	Literature review	Highlights quality assurance disparities in engineering programs. Discusses how exit exams may not account for diverse learning styles and backgrounds, potentially excluding students from non-traditional or marginalized groups.
3	Aristeidou et al. (2024)	Qualitative study	Examines barriers to online exams, such as technology access and digital literacy, which disproportionately affect students from rural areas, low-income families, and those with disabilities.
4	Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun (2022)	Case study	Explores how exit exams narrow curriculum focus, leading to "teaching to the test." This approach disadvantages students from marginalized backgrounds by limiting exposure to holistic learning experiences.
5	Ayenew & Yohannes (2022)	Qualitative analysis	Highlights socioeconomic factors affecting access to resources like textbooks, tutoring, and the internet. Examines how these disparities create barriers for students from low-income families, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

S. No.	Author(s)	Methodology Used	Equity and Inclusivity Issues
6	Baker (2019)	Statistical modeling	Discusses racial equity in higher education, arguing that exit exams can promote equity by ensuring all students meet a common standard. However, critiques suggest they may harm marginalized groups if not implemented with adequate support systems.
7	Benner (2023)	Longitudinal study	Focuses on students' perspectives on academic climate. Examines how high-stakes exams can negatively affect students' mental health and self-esteem, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds.
8	Bishop (1999)	Analytical review	Highlights national disparities in educational standards. Suggests that while exit exams can improve efficiency, they may exacerbate inequities if not designed to account for regional and socioeconomic differences.
9	Bracey (2009)	Review of literature	Raises equity concerns for marginalized students, arguing that exit exams disproportionately harm low-income and minority students by increasing dropout rates and discouraging graduation.
10	Carol & Brown (1994)	Case study	Examines inclusivity in exam design, emphasizing the need for assessments that reflect diverse student experiences and backgrounds.
11	Christina & Moorthy (2021)	Policy analysis	Explores accessibility in higher education pathways, highlighting how rigid exit exam policies may exclude non-traditional students, such as working adults or those with caregiving responsibilities.
12	Dehury (2017)	Review	Examines disparities in medical training experiences, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

S. No.	Author(s)	Methodology Used	Equity and Inclusivity Issues
			Questions whether exit exams adequately measure competency across diverse learning contexts.
13	Dempster (2012)	Comparative analysis	Highlights equity in educational standards, noting that students from wealthier families are more likely to pass exit exams due to better access to resources, perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities.
14	Fanjoy (2005)	Comparative analysis	Discusses equity in aviation training access, noting that high costs and resource disparities may exclude students from low-income backgrounds.
15	Hussan et al. (2021)	Survey	Examines perspectives from diverse student backgrounds, highlighting feelings of exclusion among marginalized students. Calls for culturally responsive assessment methods.
16	French (2023)	Literature review	Discusses the impact of high-stakes exams on underrepresented student groups, noting increased stress and anxiety. Highlights the need for alternative assessment methods to reduce inequities.
17	Hughes (2001)	Conference Proceedings	Examines equity in partnerships, noting that resource disparities between institutions can affect the implementation of inclusive exit exam policies.
18	Houchensen (2023)	Qualitative research	Focuses on African American student experiences, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive assessments that reflect students' lived experiences and identities.
19	Khan et al. (2023)	Literature review	Examines inclusivity in the pharmacy profession, noting that exit exams may

S. No.	Author(s)	Methodology Used	Equity and Inclusivity Issues
20	Lanahan (2023)	Policy analysis	not account for diverse learning needs and cultural backgrounds. Explores how corruption and inequitable resource distribution affect access to education, particularly in contexts where exit exams are used as gatekeeping mechanisms.
21	Leigh (2012)	Classroom observation	Highlights equity in teaching practices, noting that under-resourced schools are more likely to adopt "teaching to the test" approaches, which disadvantage marginalized students.
22	Merki (2011)	Quantitative study	Examines impacts on diverse student populations, noting that exit exams can negatively affect self-regulated learning for students from marginalized backgrounds.
23	Palmer et al. (2010)	Case study	Explores inclusivity in assessment methods, noting that modified essay questions can be more accessible for students with learning disabilities. However, many institutions lack the resources to implement such accommodations effectively.
24	Pioplunink (2013)	Econometric modeling	Examines impacts on different socio-economic groups, noting that exit exams may reinforce labor-market inequalities if they disproportionately disadvantage students from marginalized backgrounds.
25	Rosqvist et al. (2022)	Integrative review	Highlights equity in nursing education assessments, noting that standardized exit exams may not account for diverse learning needs and cultural backgrounds.
26	Siddiqui et al. (2020)	Literature review	Examines inclusivity in pharmacy training, noting that exit exams may not adequately measure competency across

S. No.	Author(s)	Methodology Used	Equity and Inclusivity Issues
27	Slomp et al. (2020)	Policy analysis	discusses equity concerns in exam policies, emphasizing the need for inclusive assessment strategies that consider the diverse needs of students.
28	University of Munich & Woessmann (2018)	Empirical study	Focuses on national educational equity, noting that central exit exams can improve outcomes but only if implemented with adequate support systems for marginalized students.
29	Warren & Grodsky (2009)	Literature review	Examines effects on marginalized and low-performing students, noting that exit exams disproportionately harm these groups without providing substantial benefits to those who pass.
30	Weir (2010)	Case study	Explores equity in journalism education, noting that exit exams may disadvantage students from non-traditional backgrounds or those with limited access to resources.

Narrative Analysis of Equity and Inclusivity Issues

The table highlights significant equity and inclusivity challenges associated with exit exams in higher education. A recurring theme is the disproportionate impact on marginalized groups, including students from low-income families, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities. Studies by Warren and Grodsky (2009) and Bracey (2009) reveal that high-stakes exit exams often harm students who fail them, without benefiting those who pass, exacerbating existing inequities. Socioeconomic disparities further compound these challenges, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently lack access to essential resources like tutoring and technology, as noted by Ayenew and Yohannes (2022) and Dempster (2012).

Accessibility and inclusivity in exam design are also critical concerns. Aristeidou et al. (2024) and Hussan et al. (2021) emphasize that online exams and standardized assessments often exclude students with disabilities, those from rural areas, and non-traditional learners. Culturally responsive assessment methods are needed to reflect diverse student experiences, as highlighted by Houchensen (2023). Additionally, the

psychological toll of high-stakes exams, such as stress and anxiety, disproportionately affects marginalized students, further widening achievement gaps (French, 2023; Benner, 2023).

The washback effects of exit exams on teaching practices are another key issue. Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022) and Leigh (2012) found that exit exams often narrow curricula to focus on test preparation, disadvantaging students from under-resourced institutions. This "teaching to the test" approach limits holistic learning and perpetuates inequities.

In conclusion, while exit exams aim to uphold academic standards, they often reinforce systemic inequities. Addressing these challenges requires more inclusive assessment strategies, such as adaptive testing, formative assessments, and culturally responsive methods, alongside targeted support for marginalized students. A paradigm shift in assessment practices is essential to ensure equity and inclusivity in higher education.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review reveal the complex dynamics surrounding equity and inclusivity issues associated with exit exams in higher education. While these assessments are designed to enhance academic standards and accountability, they often disproportionately impact marginalized student groups, raising serious equity concerns. The review synthesizes evidence from 30 studies, highlighting the multifaceted implications of exit exams on diverse student populations, teaching practices, and institutional policies. This discussion expands on these findings, drawing on the referenced studies to provide a deeper analysis of the equity and inclusivity challenges posed by exit exams and offering recommendations for more inclusive assessment practices.

Equity Concerns in Exit Exams

One of the most pressing issues identified in the review is the disproportionate impact of exit exams on marginalized student populations, including students from low-income backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities. Research by Warren and Grodsky (2009) underscores the harm that exit exams can cause to students who fail them, without providing substantial benefits to those who pass. This raises significant questions about the fairness of these assessments, particularly in diverse educational contexts. The high-stakes nature of exit exams can exacerbate existing inequities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack access to the resources and support needed to succeed in such assessments.

Baker (2019) argues that exit exams can potentially promote racial equity by ensuring

that all students meet a common standard. However, this perspective is contested by studies such as those by Bracey (2009) and French (2023), which highlight the negative consequences of high-stakes testing on marginalized groups. Bracey (2009) found that mandatory exit exams can discourage graduation among students from low-income families, as they are more likely to fail these exams due to inadequate preparation and support. Similarly, French (2023) notes that high-stakes exams can induce stress and anxiety, which disproportionately affect students from underrepresented groups, further widening the achievement gap.

The review also highlights the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping student outcomes in exit exams. Ayenew and Yohannes (2022) found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Ethiopia faced significant challenges in accessing the resources needed to prepare for exit exams, such as textbooks, tutoring, and internet access. This lack of access not only affects their performance but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality. Similarly, Dempster (2012) compared exit exams across four African countries and found that students from wealthier families were more likely to pass these exams, as they had access to better educational resources and support systems.

Inclusivity and Accessibility in Exit Exams

In addition to equity concerns, the review highlights significant issues related to inclusivity and accessibility in exit exams. Aristeidou et al. (2024) explored student satisfaction with online exams and found that distance-learning students often face barriers related to technology access and digital literacy. These barriers can disproportionately affect students from rural areas or those with disabilities, limiting their ability to perform well in online exit exams. The study calls for more inclusive exam designs that consider the diverse needs of students, including those with disabilities and those from non-traditional learning environments.

Similarly, Hussan et al. (2021) examined student perceptions of exit exams in civil engineering and found that students from diverse backgrounds often felt excluded from the exam preparation process. The study highlighted the need for culturally responsive assessment methods that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of students. This is particularly important in fields like engineering, where the curriculum and assessment methods are often standardized and may not account for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student population.

The review also underscores the importance of designing exit exams that are accessible to students with disabilities. Palmer et al. (2010) discussed the use of modified essay questions in exit exams and found that these formats can be more inclusive for students with learning disabilities. However, the study also noted that

many institutions lack the resources and expertise to implement such accommodations effectively. This highlights the need for greater investment in inclusive assessment practices, including the provision of accommodations such as extended time, alternative formats, and assistive technologies.

Washback Effects on Teaching Practices

Another critical issue identified in the review is the washback effect of exit exams on teaching practices. Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022) found that the implementation of exit exams can significantly influence curriculum design and instructional strategies, often narrowing the focus of education to test preparation rather than fostering holistic learning experiences. This shift in pedagogical emphasis can have long-lasting implications for the breadth and quality of education that students receive.

The review highlights that the pressure to prepare students for high-stakes exit exams can lead to a "teaching to the test" approach, where educators choose exam content over critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This approach can be particularly detrimental to students from marginalized backgrounds, as it limits their exposure to a broader range of knowledge and skills. Bishop (1999) argued that national exit exams can improve educational efficiency by aligning curricula with standardized assessments. However, the review suggests that this alignment often comes at the cost of educational quality, as teachers may feel compelled to focus on rote memorization and test-taking strategies rather than fostering deep understanding and creativity.

Furthermore, the washback effects of exit exams can exacerbate inequities in teaching practices. Leigh (2012) found that teachers in under-resourced institutions were more likely to adopt a "teaching to the test" approach, as they faced greater pressure to improve student performance on high-stakes exams. This can create a vicious cycle, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds receive a narrower and less enriching education, further limiting their opportunities for academic and professional success.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings of this review have significant implications for policymakers and educational institutions. To address the equity and inclusivity challenges associated with exit exams, it is essential to adopt more inclusive assessment strategies that consider the diverse needs of students. This could involve re-evaluating the design and implementation of exit exams to ensure they are equitable and accessible to all students, regardless of their background or circumstances.

One potential solution is the integration of formative assessments and alternative evaluation methods, which can provide a more comprehensive understanding of

student competencies. Formative assessments, such as portfolios, projects, and presentations, allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a variety of ways, reducing reliance on high-stakes exams. This approach can also help to mitigate the stress and anxiety associated with exit exams, as students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning over time.

Another recommendation is the use of adaptive testing, which tailors the difficulty of exam questions to the individual student's ability level. Adaptive testing can provide a more accurate measure of student competencies, as it reduces the risk of students being either overwhelmed or under-challenged by the exam content. This approach can be particularly beneficial for students from marginalized backgrounds, as it allows them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a way that is more aligned with their individual learning needs.

In addition to these assessment strategies, it is essential to provide additional support for at-risk students, including those from low-income families, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities. This could involve offering targeted tutoring, mentoring, and academic support programs to help students prepare for exit exams. Schools and universities should also invest in professional development for educators, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to implement inclusive assessment practices and support diverse student populations.

Finally, the review calls for a paradigm shift in how exit exams are perceived and utilized within higher education. Rather than viewing exit exams as a one-size-fits-all solution for ensuring academic standards, policymakers and educators should recognize the limitations of these assessments and explore alternative approaches that prioritize equity and inclusivity. This includes promoting culturally responsive assessment methods that reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students, as well as fostering a more holistic approach to education that values critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

In conclusion, this systematic literature review underscores the critical equity and inclusivity issues surrounding exit exams in higher education. While these assessments are intended to uphold academic standards and ensure that graduates possess the necessary competencies, they often inadvertently perpetuate disparities among diverse student populations. The evidence gathered from 30 studies reveals that exit exams can have disparate impacts on marginalized groups, including students from low-income backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities. The findings indicate that the high-stakes nature of these exams can lead to increased anxiety and stress among students, which in turn may affect their performance. Furthermore, the review highlights the washback effects on teaching

practices, suggesting that educators may narrow their curricula to focus on test preparation rather than fostering a holistic educational experience.

To address these challenges, it is essential for policymakers and educational institutions to adopt more inclusive assessment strategies. This could involve re-evaluating the design and implementation of exit exams to ensure they are equitable and accessible to all students. Furthermore, the integration of formative assessments and alternative evaluation methods could provide a more comprehensive understanding of student competencies, reducing reliance on high-stakes exams. Future research should continue to explore innovative practices that balance the need for academic rigor with the imperative of inclusivity. This includes investigating the potential benefits of adaptive testing, providing additional support for at-risk students, and promoting culturally responsive assessment methods that reflect the diverse backgrounds of the student population.

Ultimately, this review calls for a paradigm shift in how exit exams are perceived and utilized within higher education. By prioritizing equity and inclusivity in assessment practices, educational institutions can better support all students in achieving their academic and professional goals. The insights derived from this review aim to inform ongoing discussions about educational assessment, contributing to the development of fairer and more effective evaluation systems that promote success for every learner.

Future research directions

While this review provides valuable insights into the equity and inclusivity challenges associated with exit exams, there is a need for further research to explore innovative practices that balance the need for academic rigor with the imperative of inclusivity. Future studies should investigate the potential benefits of adaptive testing, formative assessments, and alternative evaluation methods in promoting equity and inclusivity in higher education. Additionally, research should explore the impact of culturally responsive assessment methods on student outcomes, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds.

Another important area for future research is the role of institutional policies and practices in shaping the equity and inclusivity of exit exams. Studies should examine how different institutional contexts, such as resource availability, teacher training, and student support services, influence the implementation and outcomes of exit exams. This research can provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to create more equitable and inclusive assessment systems.

Finally, future research should explore the long-term impacts of exit exams on student outcomes, including graduation rates, employment opportunities, and career success.

While the review highlights the immediate challenges posed by exit exams, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine how these assessments affect students' lives beyond graduation. This research can help to inform more holistic approaches to assessment that support students' academic and professional success over the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By adopting the following recommendation, higher education can evolve exit exams from instruments of exclusion to platforms for demonstrating competence.

1. Diversify assessment approaches by introducing mixed-method evaluations combining traditional exams with competency-based demonstrations (e.g., presentations, case studies, or practical simulations).
2. Eliminate systemic barriers by establishing pre-exam equity audits to identify and remove cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic biases in exam content and administration and creating resource hubs where students from under-resourced institutions can access free preparatory materials, mentorship, and technology.
3. Personalize accommodations by developing individualized assessment plans and expanding alternative testing formats such as oral exams, project submissions, or extended timelines.
4. Transform institutional culture by providing faculty training programs on recognizing implicit bias in assessment design and grading practices and integrating student voice committees to co-design exam policies.
5. Develop policy-level interventions like connecting accreditation standards to demonstrated progress in closing exam- related achievement gaps.

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