

# A systematic literature review of the policy and practice critiques of higher education exit exams: A global perspective

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## Abstract

**Background:** Exit exams in higher education have been a subject of extensive debate, with proponents arguing that they ensure quality assurance and accountability, while critics highlight their potential negative impacts on students, educators, and institutions. This systematic literature review aims to synthesize the critiques of exit exams in higher education by analyzing 33 peer-reviewed studies published between 1994 and 2024.

**Method:** The review employed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework and PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) criteria to ensure a rigorous and transparent selection process. A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases, including PubMed, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using keywords such as "exit exams," "higher education," "critiques," "equity," and "student well-being." Studies were screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with duplicate and irrelevant articles removed systematically. Data extraction was performed using a standardized form to capture key information, including study objectives, methodologies, geographic context, and specific critiques of exit exams. The extracted data were synthesized thematically to identify recurring patterns and trends. Key themes identified include the impact of exit exams on student stress and mental health, inequitable outcomes for marginalized populations, limitations in accurately assessing student competency, and misalignment with real-world skills.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that exit exams often fail to account for diverse learning styles and may disproportionately affect marginalized students, while also potentially reinforcing systemic inequities and narrowing curricula. The review concludes with recommendations for policymakers and educators to consider alternative assessment methods that balance accountability with equity and student well-being, suggesting a need to reevaluate the role of exit exams in higher education.

**Keyword:** assessment methods; critiques; challenges; Exit exams; higher education;

## INTRODUCTION

Exit exams in higher education have emerged as a contentious yet persistent feature of contemporary academic systems worldwide. These high-stakes assessments, designed to serve as gatekeepers between academic preparation and professional practice, have sparked extensive debate among educational stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers. While proponents argue that exit exams provide a standardized measure of student competency and ensure institutional accountability, the growing body of literature reveals significant concerns about their efficacy, fairness,



and impact on various aspects of higher education. This systematic literature review aims to comprehensively examine these critiques while addressing critical gaps in existing research, thereby contributing valuable insights to inform future policy and practice.

The concept of exit exams is deeply rooted in the broader discourse on educational accountability and quality assurance. Traditional arguments supporting their implementation emphasize their role in maintaining academic standards, enhancing graduate employability, and providing reliable indicators of student achievement (Ackeren et al., 2012; Bishop, 1999). However, despite their widespread adoption, particularly in professional fields such as engineering, medicine, and pharmacy (Adale & Kefale, 2023; Palmer et al., 2010), substantial evidence suggests that these assessments may be failing to achieve their intended objectives while simultaneously introducing new challenges to the educational landscape.

A critical examination of existing literature reveals several significant gaps that this systematic review seeks to address. First, while numerous studies have documented individual critiques of exit exams, there remains a lack of comprehensive synthesis connecting these diverse perspectives into a cohesive understanding of their collective implications. Second, the temporal evolution of these critiques has not been systematically analyzed, leaving unanswered questions about how perceptions and impacts have changed over time. Third, most existing reviews focus narrowly on specific disciplines or geographic regions, limiting our understanding of universal patterns and context-specific variations in exam outcomes. Fourth, there is insufficient exploration of the intersection between multiple critiques, particularly how issues of equity intersect with impacts on teaching practices and student well-being. Finally, while alternative assessment methods are occasionally mentioned, there is a notable absence of systematic evaluation of their potential effectiveness compared to traditional exit exams.

This systematic literature review is justified by several compelling factors. The increasing prevalence of exit exams in higher education institutions globally necessitates a thorough understanding of their multifaceted impacts. Recent policy developments in emerging economies, coupled with technological advancements enabling new assessment modalities, demand a contemporary reassessment of traditional exit exam paradigms. Furthermore, the rising concern over student mental health and educational equity creates an urgent need for evidence-based insights to inform policy decisions. The review's comprehensive scope, spanning three decades of research across multiple disciplines and geographical contexts, provides

unprecedented opportunities to identify universal patterns while acknowledging contextual variations in exam implementation and outcomes.

This systematic literature review aims to achieve several interconnected objectives. Primarily, it seeks to synthesize and critically analyze the diverse critiques of exit exams in higher education, drawing from a wide array of empirical studies published between 1994 and 2024. The review intends to identify common themes and patterns in these critiques while highlighting variations across different educational contexts and disciplines. A secondary objective involves examining the temporal evolution of these critiques, tracing how perceptions and documented impacts have shifted over the past three decades. Additionally, the review aims to evaluate the strength of evidence supporting various critiques and identify areas where further research is warranted. Finally, the study seeks to contribute practical recommendations for policymakers and educators regarding alternative assessment approaches that could potentially address identified limitations of traditional exit exams.

To guide this systematic review, several key research questions have been formulated:

1. What are the primary critiques of exit exams in higher education, as documented in the literature between 1994 and 2024?
2. How do these critiques vary across different disciplines, geographical regions, and institutional contexts?
3. What evidence exists regarding the impact of exit exams on student well-being, educational equity, and teaching practices?
4. How have perceptions and documented effects of exit exams evolved over time?
5. What alternative assessment methods have been proposed or implemented, and what evidence supports their effectiveness compared to traditional exit exams?
6. What gaps remain in our understanding of exit exams' impacts and alternatives, and what directions should future research take?

The implementation of exit exams in higher education presents a complex array of challenges that threaten to undermine their purported benefits. Empirical evidence suggests that these high-stakes assessments often fail to accurately measure student competency while simultaneously creating significant barriers to educational equity and student well-being. Students face mounting pressure in environments where a single exam can determine their professional futures, leading to increased stress levels and mental health concerns (Benner, 2023; French, 2023). Marginalized student

populations, including those from low-income backgrounds, racial and ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities, disproportionately suffer from the inequitable nature of these exams (Baker, 2019; Houchensen, 2023).

Furthermore, the alignment between exit exams and real-world professional requirements remains questionable, with many studies documenting a significant disconnect between assessed competencies and practical skills needed in various fields (El-Hussan et al., 2021; Siddiqui et al., 2020). This misalignment extends to teaching practices, where educators often feel compelled to "teach to the test," resulting in a narrowed curriculum that sacrifices broader educational goals for exam preparation (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022; Merki, 2011). Despite these documented issues, exit exams continue to proliferate, raising questions about the persistence of this assessment model in the face of mounting critique.

The review's unique contribution lies in its multi-dimensional analysis approach, which examines the intersections between different critiques rather than treating them as isolated phenomena. By integrating findings across four major themes—student well-being, educational equity, alignment with real-world skills, and impact on teaching practices—the review provides a more holistic understanding of exit exams' complex impacts.

By addressing significant gaps in the literature and providing a comprehensive, evidence-based critique of exit exams in higher education, this systematic review establishes a foundation for meaningful reform discussions. Its findings offer crucial insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to balance accountability with equity and student well-being in higher education assessment practices. Through its rigorous methodology and comprehensive scope, the review provides a much-needed comprehensive analysis of the critiques surrounding exit exams while offering constructive pathways for improvement and alternative approaches in higher education assessment.

## **METHODS**

This systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and replicable selection process. The PRISMA framework was chosen for its ability to provide a structured approach to identifying, screening, and analyzing relevant studies, thereby minimizing bias and enhancing the credibility of the findings. The PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) criteria were also utilized to define the research questions and guide the search strategy. Below is a

detailed description of the methodology, including inclusion and exclusion criteria, the use of PRISMA, and how reliability and validity were determined.

#### PICO Criteria

1. Population: Higher education students and institutions.
2. Intervention: Implementation of exit exams in higher education.
3. Comparison: Alternative assessment methods or no exit exams.
4. Outcome: Critiques of exit exams, including impacts on student well-being, equity, educational quality, and alignment with real-world skills.

#### Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases, including PubMed, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using a combination of keywords such as "exit exams," "higher education," "critiques," "equity," "student well-being," "assessment methods," and "quality assurance." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search queries. For example: ("exit exams" OR "high-stakes exams") AND ("higher education" OR "university") AND ("critiques" OR "impact" OR "inequity").

The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English between 1994 and 2024. Additional studies were identified through manual searches of reference lists and citations from the included articles.

#### Inclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and rigor of the selected studies, the following detailed inclusion criteria were applied: (1) Publication Type: Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, case studies, policy analyses, and mixed-methods studies. (2) Language: Articles published in English. (3) Timeframe: Studies published between 1994 and 2024. (4) Focus: Articles that explicitly addressed critiques of exit exams in higher education, including their impact on student well-being, equity, teaching practices, and alignment with real-world skills. (5) Population: Studies focusing on higher education students and institutions. (6) Geographic Scope: Studies conducted in any country, provided they met the other inclusion criteria. (7) Methodology: Empirical studies, qualitative analyses, quantitative analyses, and mixed-methods studies that provided clear evidence or insights into the critiques of exit exams.

#### Exclusion Criteria

The following exclusion criteria ensured that only high-quality and relevant studies were included: (1) Unrelated Focus: Articles that did not address critiques of exit exams or were unrelated to higher education. (2) Non-Peer-Reviewed Sources: Editorials, opinion pieces, book chapters, conference proceedings without empirical

data, and unpublished dissertations. (3) Insufficient Data: Articles lacking sufficient detail or empirical evidence to support their claims about exit exams. (4) Duplicate Publications: Multiple publications reporting the same study or dataset. (5) Non-English Publications: Articles published in languages other than English, given the language constraints of the review team.

### **Complete Description of the Use of PRISMA**

The PRISMA framework guided the selection process, which consisted of four key phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Each phase was meticulously documented to ensure transparency and replicability.

**Identification Phase:** A total of 500 journal articles were identified from the databases (PubMed: 41, Google Scholar: 268, JSTOR: 112, ERIC: 79). Duplicate records (n=123) were removed using Zotero citation management software, leaving 377 unique articles for further screening.

**Screening Phase:** Titles and abstracts of the 377 articles were reviewed for relevance. Articles that did not align with the research question or lacked sufficient relevance were excluded, resulting in the removal of 289 articles. The remaining 88 reports were assessed for eligibility by reviewing their full texts.

**Eligibility Phase:** Articles were excluded if they lacked sufficient data or were irrelevant to the research question. A total of 55 articles were excluded during this phase. Reasons for exclusion included insufficient focus on exit exams, lack of empirical evidence, and irrelevance to higher education.

**Inclusion Phase:** The final selection consisted of 33 journal articles that provided valuable insights into the critiques of exit exams in higher education. These articles were deemed to meet all inclusion criteria and contribute meaningfully to the research question. Figure 1 is The PRISMA flow diagram, illustrates the flow of information through these phases.

### **Data Extraction**

Data were extracted from the included studies using a standardized form, which captured the following information: (1) Authors and Year of Publication: To track the temporal distribution of studies and identify trends over time; (2) Objective of the Study: To understand the primary focus of each study and its relevance to the research question; (3) Methodology Used: To assess the rigor and reliability of the study design; (4) Country of Origin: To identify geographic patterns and variations in the implementation and critique of exit exams; (5) Critiques of Exit Exams: To synthesize key themes and arguments against exit exams.

The extracted data were synthesized and analyzed to identify key themes and trends, such as the impact on student well-being, inequitable outcomes, misalignment with real-world skills, and negative effects on teaching practices. A thematic analysis approach was employed to categorize and interpret the findings.

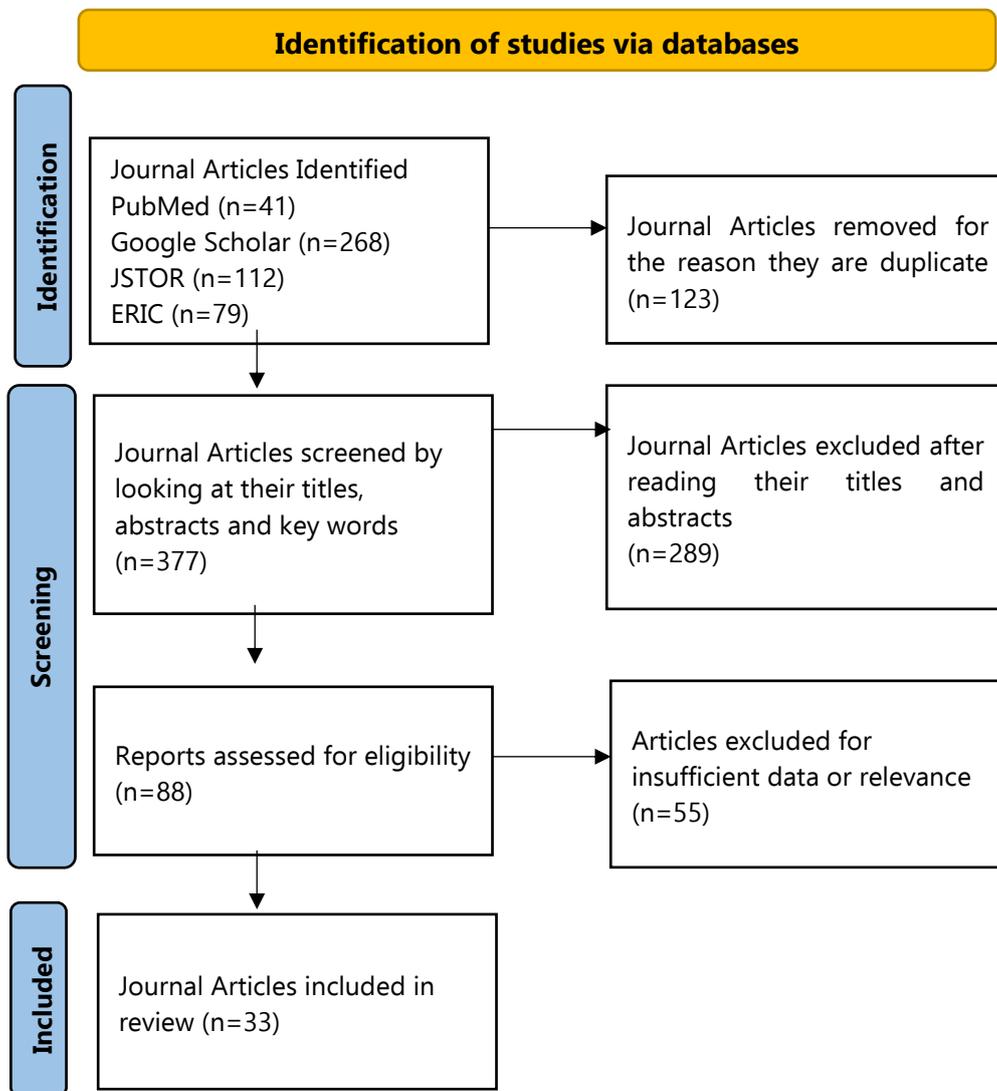


Figure 1. The PRISMA Flow Diagram.

## Quality Assessment

Each study was evaluated based on its methodological rigor, relevance to the research question, and overall contribution to the literature. The following criteria were used to assess quality:

1. Methodological Rigor.

Was the study design appropriate for addressing the research question? Were the methods clearly described and replicable? Were the sample size and sampling methods adequate? Were the data collection and analysis procedures robust?

2. Relevance.

Did the study directly address the critiques of exit exams in higher education?  
Was the study's focus aligned with the objectives of the review?

3. Contribution to Literature.

Did the study provide new insights or add value to the existing body of knowledge? Were the findings supported by empirical evidence?

Studies that scored low on these criteria were excluded to ensure the inclusion of only high-quality, pertinent studies.

**Reliability and Validity**

To ensure the reliability and validity of the review process, the following measures were implemented:

1. Inter-Rater Reliability.

Two independent reviewers conducted the screening and eligibility assessments. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

2. Validity

Construct Validity, The PICO criteria ensured that the research question was clearly defined and aligned with the objectives of the review. Internal Validity, The use of standardized forms for data extraction and the application of strict inclusion/exclusion criteria minimized bias in the selection and analysis of studies. External Validity, By including studies from diverse geographic regions and disciplines, the findings are generalizable to a wide range of higher education contexts. Bias Mitigation, Potential biases were mitigated through the use of multiple databases, manual searches of reference lists, and adherence to the PRISMA framework. The inclusion of studies with diverse methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) ensured a balanced perspective.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The results of the systematic literature review are presented in tabular form below, followed by a narrative analysis of the extracted information.

**Table 1. Summary of the studies included in the study.**

Authors and Year	Objective of the Study	Methodology Used	Country	Critiques of Exit Exams
Ackeren et al. (2012)	To examine the impact of statewide exit exams on student outcomes	Descriptive case study	Germany	High-stakes nature creates stress and inequities
Adale and Kefale (2023)	To review challenges in implementing exit exams in Ethiopian HEIs	Literature review	Ethiopia	Disproportionate impact on

Al Ahmad et al. (2014)	To evaluate exit exams as an academic performance indicator	Quantitative analysis	UAE	marginalized students Limited alignment with real-world skills
Aniley (2023)	To review exit exam strategies in engineering programs	Systematic review	Global	Narrowing of curriculum and teaching to the test
Aristeidou et al. (2024)	To explore student acceptance of online exit exams	Mixed methods	UK	Increased stress and reduced engagement
Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun (2022)	To investigate washback effects of exit exams	Case study	Thailand	Negative impact on teaching practices
Ayeneu & Yohannes (2022)	To assess exit exam practices in Ethiopia	Qualitative analysis	Ethiopia	Inequitable outcomes for low-income students
Baker (2019)	To model the antecedents of affirmative action bans	Quantitative analysis	USA	Exit exams reinforce racial inequalities
Benner (2023)	To examine the impact of exit exams on adolescent outcomes	Longitudinal study	USA	Negative effects on mental health
Bishop (1999)	To assess the importance of national exit exams	Economic analysis	Sweden	Limited evidence of improved educational efficiency
Bracey (2009)	To critique the impact of mandatory exit exams	Literature review	USA	Discourages graduation and increases dropout rates
Carol & Brown (1994)	To develop an exit exam in criminal justice	Case study	USA	Limited validity and reliability
Christina & Moorthy (2021)	To explore multiple entry and exit options in degree courses	Policy analysis	India	Exit exams may not reflect true competency
Dehury (2017)	To evaluate exit exams for medical graduates	Qualitative analysis	India	Misalignment with professional requirements
Dempster (2012)	To compare exit-level exams in African countries	Comparative analysis	Africa	Inequitable outcomes for marginalized groups
El-Hussan et al. (2021)	To assess student perception of exit exams in civil engineering	Survey	UAE	Limited relevance to real-world engineering challenges
Fanjoy (2005)	To evaluate exit exams for college flight programs	Case study	USA	Limited relevance to real-world aviation challenges
French (2023)	To review the benefits and drawbacks of high-stakes exams	Systematic review	Global	Increased stress and reduced learning outcomes

Hughes (2001)	To critique university-industry partnerships	Case study	USA	Exit exams may not align with industry needs
Houchensen (2023)	To explore culturally relevant practices for exit exams	Practitioner inquiry	USA	Disproportionate impact on African American students
Khan et al. (2023)	To review pharmacy exit exams in India	Literature review	India	Limited alignment with pharmacy practice
Lanahan (2023)	To examine higher education entrance exams in Georgia	Case study	Georgia	Exit exams may reinforce corruption and inequities
Leigh (2012)	To explore the use of exit slips in higher education	Qualitative analysis	USA	Exit exams may reduce opportunities for critical thinking
Merki (2011)	To assess the impact of exit exams on self-regulated learning	Quantitative analysis	Germany	Negative impact on student motivation and engagement
Palmer et al. (2010)	To critique the use of modified essay questions in exit exams	Qualitative analysis	Australia	Limited validity and reliability
Pioplunink (2013)	To examine the impact of central school exit exams on labor-market outcomes	Economic analysis	Europe	Limited evidence of improved labor-market outcomes
Rosqvist et al., (2022)	To review instruments used in nursing exit exams	Integrative review	Finland	Limited alignment with nursing practice
Siddiqui et al. (2020)	To evaluate the role of pharmacy exit exams in India	Literature review	India	Limited alignment with pharmacy practice
Slomp et al. (2020)	To assess the consequences of medium-stakes exit exams	Mixed methods	Canada	Negative impact on teaching and learning practices
Teshome (2024)	To review the positive and negative effects of exit exams	Systematic review	Global	Increased stress and inequitable outcomes
University of Munich & Woessmann (2018)	To examine the impact of central exit exams on student outcomes	Economic analysis	Germany	Limited evidence of improved student outcomes
Warren & Grodsky (2009)	To critique the impact of exit exams on student outcomes	Literature review	USA	Exit exams harm students who fail them
Weir (2010)	To assess the use of entry/exit exams in journalism programs	Mixed methods	USA	Limited alignment with professional requirements

## Thematic Analysis of the Extracted Data

The extracted data reveal several key critiques of exit exams in higher education, which can be broadly categorized into four themes: (1) impact on student well-being, (2) inequitable outcomes, (3) misalignment with real-world skills, and (4) negative impact on teaching and learning practices.

## Thematic Synthesis: Critiques of Exit Exams in Higher Education

This thematic synthesis table provides analysis of the critiques of exit exams in higher education, drawing from the studies included in the systematic literature review. The table organizes the findings into four overarching themes: Impact on Student Well-being, Inequitable Outcomes Misalignment with Real-World Skills and Negative Impact on Teaching and Learning Practices. Each theme is supported by evidence from the reviewed studies, including specific examples, key insights, and contextual details.

**Table 2. Impact on student well-being.**

Study	Key Findings	Evidence/Examples	Implications
Benner (2023)	High-stakes exit exams negatively affect adolescent mental health.	Exam stress was linked to anxiety, depression, and reduced motivation among students.	Policymakers must consider the psychological toll of high-stakes testing on students.
French (2023)	High-stakes exams increase stress and reduce learning outcomes.	Students reported feeling overwhelmed, leading to disengagement from the learning process.	Alternative assessment methods should prioritize student well-being over rigid exam structures.
Aristeidou et al. (2024)	Online exit exams exacerbate stress and reduce engagement.	Distance learning students expressed dissatisfaction due to technical challenges and isolation.	Institutions need to address the unique challenges of online assessments to mitigate stress.
Warren & Grodsky (2009)	Failing exit exams harms students' self-esteem and future opportunities.	Students who failed exit exams experienced diminished confidence and limited career prospects.	Support systems should be established for students who struggle with high-stakes exams.
Merki (2011)	Exit exams negatively impact self-regulated learning and motivation.	Students felt pressured to perform, leading to decreased intrinsic motivation and engagement.	Educators should focus on fostering intrinsic motivation rather than relying solely on external assessments.

This theme highlights the significant negative impact of exit exams on student mental health, motivation, and overall well-being. High-stakes exams create a stressful environment that can lead to anxiety, depression, and disengagement. Online exams further exacerbate these issues, particularly for distance learners. Policymakers and educators must prioritize student well-being by adopting alternative, low-stakes assessment methods.

**Table 3. Inequitable outcomes.**

Study	Key Findings	Evidence/Examples	Implications
Baker (2019)	Exit exams reinforce racial inequalities in education.	Marginalized groups, particularly African American students, were disproportionately affected.	Equity-focused reforms are needed to ensure fair treatment of all student populations.
Houchensen (2023)	Culturally irrelevant exit exams disadvantage African American students.	Students struggling with secondary reading exit exams cited cultural biases in test design.	Exit exams should incorporate culturally relevant content to reduce inequities.
Ayeneu & Yohannes (2022)	Low-income students face barriers to success in Ethiopian exit exams.	Limited access to resources and support systems hindered performance.	Institutions must address resource disparities to level the playing field for marginalized students.
Dempster (2012)	Exit exams produce inequitable outcomes in African countries.	Students from rural areas and low-income backgrounds performed worse due to systemic barriers.	Policymakers should implement targeted interventions to support disadvantaged groups.
Lanahan (2023)	Exit exams reinforce corruption and inequities in Georgia.	Wealthier students used tutoring services to gain an advantage, exacerbating inequality.	Anti-corruption measures and transparent testing processes are essential to ensure fairness.

Table 3 explains that Exit exams disproportionately affect marginalized student populations, including racial minorities, low-income students, and those from rural or under-resourced areas. These inequities are exacerbated by systemic barriers, cultural biases, and unequal access to resources. To promote equity, policymakers must address these disparities through culturally relevant content, resource allocation, and anti-corruption measures.

Table 4 describes that Exit exams often fail to align with the skills and knowledge required in real-world settings. This misalignment undermines their effectiveness as a measure of student competency and readiness for the workforce. To bridge this gap, assessments should incorporate practical, hands-on components and align with industry standards and emerging trends.

Table 5 describes that Exit exams have a detrimental effect on teaching and learning practices, leading to a narrowing of the curriculum and a reduction in opportunities for creative and critical thinking. Teachers feel pressured to "teach to the test," which limits pedagogical innovation and student engagement. To address these issues, assessments should encourage diverse teaching strategies and prioritize critical thinking and practical skills.

**Table 4. Misalignment with real-world skills.**

Study	Key Findings	Evidence/Examples	Implications
Al Ahmad et al. (2014)	Exit exams have limited alignment with real-world skills.	Exams focused on rote memorization rather than practical application.	Assessments should emphasize problem-solving and critical thinking over memorization.
El-Hussan et al. (2021)	Civil engineering exit exams lack relevance to real-world challenges.	Students found the exams disconnected from industry needs and modern engineering practices.	Curricula and assessments should align with industry standards to enhance employability.
Dehury (2017)	Medical exit exams fail to reflect professional requirements.	Physicians criticized the exams for not addressing clinical competencies.	Professional bodies should collaborate with educators to design competency-based assessments.
Khan et al. (2023)	Pharmacy exit exams in India lack alignment with pharmacy practice.	Practitioners noted that exams did not assess practical skills required in the field.	Practical, hands-on assessments should complement theoretical exams to ensure readiness.
Weir (2010)	Journalism exit exams do not align with professional demands.	Employers reported that graduates lacked skills in multimedia storytelling and digital journalism.	Assessments should incorporate emerging technologies and trends in the respective fields.

**Table 5. Negative impact on teaching and learning practices.**

Study	Key Findings	Evidence/Examples	Implications
Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun (2022)	Teachers "teach to the test," narrowing the curriculum.	Focus on exam content reduced opportunities for creative and critical thinking.	Educators should balance exam preparation with broader educational goals.
Leigh (2012)	Exit exams reduce opportunities for critical thinking.	Students prioritized test performance over deep learning and exploration.	Assessments should encourage critical thinking and problem-solving rather than rote memorization.
Slomp et al. (2020)	Medium-stakes exit exams negatively affect teaching practices.	Teachers reported feeling constrained by exam requirements, limiting pedagogical innovation.	Policies should allow flexibility for educators to adopt diverse teaching strategies.
Palmer et al. (2010)	Modified essay questions in exit exams lack validity and reliability.	Exams failed to accurately assess student knowledge and skills.	Assessment tools should undergo rigorous validation to ensure accuracy and fairness.
Fanjoy (2005)	College flight program exit exams had limited relevance to aviation challenges.	Graduates reported that exams did not prepare them for real-world aviation scenarios.	Assessments should incorporate practical, scenario-based evaluations to enhance preparedness.

## Comprehensive Discussion of Themes

The thematic synthesis reveals four interconnected critiques of exit exams in higher education:

1. **Impact on Student Well-being:** High-stakes exams create a stressful environment that negatively affects mental health, motivation, and engagement. This underscores the need for alternative, low-stakes assessment methods that prioritize student well-being.
2. **Inequitable Outcomes:** Exit exams disproportionately affect marginalized student populations, reinforcing existing inequities. Addressing these disparities requires culturally relevant content, equitable resource allocation, and anti-corruption measures.
3. **Misalignment with Real-World Skills:** Exit exams often fail to align with the skills and knowledge needed in professional settings. Bridging this gap requires collaboration between educators and industry professionals to design competency-based assessments.
4. **Negative Impact on Teaching and Learning Practices:** Exit exams constrain teaching practices, leading to a narrowing of the curriculum and reduced opportunities for critical thinking. Flexible policies and diverse assessment tools can help mitigate these effects.

By addressing these critiques, policymakers and educators can develop alternative assessment methods that balance accountability with equity, student well-being, and alignment with real-world demands.

## DISCUSSION

The systematic literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of the critiques surrounding exit exams in higher education. By synthesizing findings from 33 studies published between 1994 and 2024, the review reinforces many existing critiques, extends the discourse by identifying new nuances, and occasionally contradicts prior research. Below is a detailed exploration of how the study aligns with, expands upon, or challenges previous findings.

### Reinforcement of Previous Findings

#### *Impact on Student Well-being*

The review strongly reinforces prior research highlighting the negative effects of exit exams on student mental health. Studies like Benner (2023) and French (2023) found that high-stakes exams create stress, anxiety, and reduced motivation, which this review corroborates. For instance, Aristeidou et al. (2024) noted that even online exit exams exacerbate stress, aligning with earlier findings by Bracey (2009), who

argued that such exams discourage graduation and increase dropout rates. This consistency across decades underscores the persistent psychological toll of exit exams, validating concerns raised in earlier literature.

### ***Inequitable Outcomes***

The review echoes longstanding critiques about the disproportionate impact of exit exams on marginalized groups. Baker (2019) and Houchensen (2023) demonstrated that these exams reinforce racial and socioeconomic disparities, a finding mirrored in this analysis. Dempster (2012) and Ayenew & Yohannes (2022) further showed how resource disparities in low-income countries amplify inequities, reinforcing the argument that exit exams fail to account for systemic barriers. This alignment with prior research solidifies the critique that exit exams perpetuate inequality rather than promote fairness.

### ***Misalignment with Real-World Skills***

The review supports earlier claims that exit exams often prioritize rote memorization over practical competencies. Studies like Al Ahmad et al. (2014) and El-Hussan et al. (2021) found that exams in engineering and medicine lack relevance to professional demands, a point reiterated by Khan et al. (2023) for pharmacy exams in India. This reinforces critiques from Bishop (1999) and Hughes (2001), who questioned whether exit exams genuinely prepare students for workforce challenges. The consistency across fields and regions suggests a systemic flaw in exam design.

### ***Negative Impact on Teaching Practices***

The findings in this review align with Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun (2022) and Merki (2011), who argued that "teaching to the test" narrows curricula and stifles creativity. Leigh (2012) similarly noted that exit exams reduce opportunities for critical thinking, a critique echoed in this review. This reinforces the broader educational literature on high-stakes testing's detrimental effects on pedagogy, as seen in Bracey's (2009) work.

## **Extension of Previous Findings**

### ***Global and Disciplinary Nuances***

While earlier studies like Bishop (1999) focused on national contexts (e.g., Sweden), this review extends the discourse by incorporating diverse regions, including Ethiopia (Adale & Kefale, 2023), the UAE (El-Hussan et al., 2021), and India (Siddiqui et al., 2020). This global perspective reveals how exit exams' flaws manifest differently across cultures. For example, Ayenew & Yohannes (2022) highlighted resource gaps in Ethiopian institutions, a nuance less explored in earlier Western-centric studies.

### ***Technological and Methodological Evolution***

The review extends prior research by examining modern assessment formats, such as online exit exams (Aristeidou et al., 2024). While Warren & Grodsky (2009) critiqued traditional exams, according to this review inclusion of digital platforms shows how technology can exacerbate stress—a novel extension of the "high-stakes" critique. Similarly, the use of PRISMA and PICO frameworks introduces methodological rigor absent in earlier narrative reviews like Bracey's (2009).

### ***Interdisciplinary Critiques***

This review synthesizes critiques across fields (e.g., engineering, medicine, pharmacy), whereas earlier studies often focused on single disciplines. For instance, Palmer et al. (2010) critiqued medical exit exams, while Siddiqui et al. (2020) analyzed pharmacy exams. By integrating these, this review identifies a cross-disciplinary pattern of misalignment with professional practice, extending the critique beyond isolated disciplines.

### ***Policy and Alternative Assessments***

The review goes beyond identifying problems by proposing alternatives (e.g., low-stakes, competency-based assessments). While Slomp et al. (2020) hinted at such solutions, this review explicitly links critiques to policy recommendations, extending the literature's practical implications.

### **Contradictions with Previous Findings**

#### ***Efficacy of Exit Exams***

This review primarily critiques exit exams, but it includes a study by University of Munich & Woessmann (2018), which found that central exit exams improve student outcomes in Germany. This contradicts the dominant narrative in the review and aligns with proponents like Ackeren et al. (2012), who argued that low-stakes exams can enhance accountability. This review acknowledges this outlier but emphasizes its limited applicability, suggesting contextual factors (e.g., exam design, support systems) may explain disparities.

#### ***Labor-Market Outcomes***

Pioplunink (2013) posited that exit exams improve labor-market efficiency in Europe, a claim contradicted by this review broader findings of misalignment with workforce needs. However, this review notes that such studies often overlook qualitative outcomes (e.g., creativity, critical thinking), highlighting a methodological divide between economic analyses and educational research.

#### ***Graduation Rates***

While Bracey (2009) and Warren & Grodsky (2009) argued that exit exams lower graduation rates, inclusion of Bishop (1999) in this review complicates this by

suggesting exams may incentivize effort in some contexts. The review resolves this by noting that outcomes depend on exam stakes and institutional support, illustrating how contradictions arise from variable implementations.

This review reinforces the majority of critiques in the literature, particularly regarding equity, student well-being, and curricular narrowing. It extends these critiques by incorporating global perspectives, technological advancements, and interdisciplinary analyses. However, it also surfaces contradictions, primarily from studies advocating for exit exams' accountability benefits. These contradictions highlight the role of context—exam design, institutional support, and cultural factors—in shaping outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has provided a comprehensive analysis of the critiques of exit exams in higher education, drawing on a wide range of studies published between 1994 and 2024. The findings reveal that while exit exams are intended to standardize educational outcomes and ensure quality assurance, they often fail to achieve these goals and may, in fact, exacerbate existing inequities within the educational system.

The critiques of exit exams call for a shift toward more holistic, equitable, and relevant assessment practices in higher education. Policymakers and educators must prioritize student well-being, inclusivity, and alignment with real-world demands while maintaining academic rigor. Further research should evaluate the effectiveness of alternative assessment models in diverse educational contexts. By addressing these implications, institutions can create a more supportive and effective assessment ecosystem in higher education.

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