

Students Speak: Do College Exit Exams Unleash Motivation or Fuel Stress?

Feyisa Mulisa and Mekonnen Kejela

Abstract

College exit exams serve as indicators of students' academic achievement and career readiness. However, a significant concern is the stress these exams may impose on students. Some students may also question the usefulness of these exams, which can negatively affect their performance. The purpose of this article is to assess students' perceptions of the relevance, validity, motivation, the ability to promote self-awareness, and the stress associated with exit exams. To gather data, we administered questionnaires and conducted interviews with 113 students who had taken an exit exam at Ambo University. The findings indicate that students generally have moderately positive perceptions regarding the relevance and validity of the exit exams. Additionally, the exams were found to be highly motivating and effective tools for identifying individual strengths and weaknesses. While this positive perception is an opportunity to increase the effectiveness of the exam, the paradox is that it is stressful for female students. Therefore, it is essential to pay special attention to the experiences of female students. The implication is that by considering students' experiences, we can create a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes academic achievement and overall well-being.

Key words: exit exam, students' perceptions, relevance, motivations, stress

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: FEYISA MULISA, email: fayisamu@gmail.com, and MEKONNEN KEJELA, Email: kejelamekonnen@yahoo.com, Ambo University, Ethiopia

Mulisa, F., & Kejela, M. (2025). Students Speak: Do College Exit Exams Unleash Motivation or fuel stress?. *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 11(3), 108-127. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ijah.v11i3.17271>

Résumé: Les examens de fin d'études servent d'indicateurs de la réussite scolaire et de la préparation à la carrière des étudiants. Cependant, le stress que ces examens peuvent imposer aux étudiants est une préoccupation importante. Certains étudiants peuvent également remettre en question l'utilité de ces examens, ce qui peut avoir un impact négatif sur leurs performances. L'objectif de cet article est d'évaluer les perceptions des étudiants quant à la pertinence, la validité, la motivation, la capacité à promouvoir la conscience de soi et le stress associé aux examens de fin d'études. Pour recueillir les données, nous avons administré un questionnaire et mené des entretiens avec 113 étudiants ayant passé un examen de fin d'études à l'université d'Ambo. Les résultats indiquent que les étudiants ont généralement une perception modérément positive de la pertinence et de la validité des examens de fin d'études. En outre, les examens se sont révélés être des outils très motivants et efficaces pour identifier les forces et les faiblesses individuelles. Si cette perception positive permet d'accroître l'efficacité de l'examen, le paradoxe est qu'il est stressant pour les étudiantes. Il est donc essentiel d'accorder une attention particulière aux expériences des étudiantes. La conséquence est qu'en prenant en compte les expériences des étudiants, nous pouvons créer un environnement favorable et inclusif qui favorise la réussite scolaire et le bien-être général.

Mots clés: examen de fin d'études, perceptions des étudiants, pertinence, motivations, stress

Introduction

An exit exam is a type of assessment that students must complete to graduate from a specific level of education, such as high school or college (El-Hassan et al., 2021). These exams are primarily designed to evaluate students' mastery of the curriculum and their readiness to advance to the next stage of their academic or professional careers (Ayenew & Gebre Yohannes, 2022; Holme et al., 2010; Schumacker et al., 2021). However, exit exams are also controversial, as they can negatively affect students' performance and well-being (Hall et al., 2020; Holme et al., 2010; Machin et al., 2020). For instance, some authors, such as El-Hassan et al. (2021) and Maag Merki & Holmeier (2015), argue that these exams are essential to ensure that students possess the knowledge and skills necessary for success in university and beyond. Conversely, other authors contend that exit exams provide minimal benefits, do not contribute to students' academic goals, or may even hinder their performance (Hall et al., 2020). Overall, exit exams are a prevalent yet contentious practice within educational systems. Therefore, it is crucial to assess their advantages and disadvantages from

the perspectives of various stakeholders. The purpose of this study is to explore the pros and cons of exit exams from the students' viewpoint by examining their usefulness, including relevance, validity, motivation, and the stress they impose on students. By offering insights into how students perceive exit exams, this study will serve the interests of a diverse range of stakeholders, including administrators and policymakers.

While the usefulness of the exit exam is represented by four factors, the first factor is the relevance of the exam. Relevance is defined as the degree to which the exam content aligns with the learning objectives, industry standards, and the practical application of the study in the field (Holme et al., 2010; Palmer et al., 2010). It is contingent upon the overall usefulness of the exams in measuring essential educational goals as well as societal needs and expectations (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2020). For instance, a relevant exit exam in a computer science programme would evaluate a student's ability to write code, design algorithms, and troubleshoot software applications. The rationale is that students' perceptions of the relevance of exams can significantly influence their preparation and final performance (Reardon et al., 2010; Schlemer & Waldorf, 2010). Understanding the relevance of exit exams is crucial for developing accurate and comprehensive exams that measure students' proficiency in the subject matter and prepare them for success in their future careers (El-Hassan et al., 2021; Langford & Young, 2013).

The validity of the exit exam, on the other hand, pertains to how accurately the exam questions measure the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students have acquired from their curriculum (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; El-Hassan et al., 2021; Holme et al., 2010). It is about the proper alignment of exam questions with curriculum objectives, such as knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The focus of the exam's validity is on its psychometric robustness (Palmer et al., 2010). This involves ensuring that each item on the exam effectively measures the intended knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the students and that the questions are representative of the learning objectives of the subject (Langford & Young, 2013). For instance, a valid nursing exit exam includes specific and detailed questions that assess the student's clinical skills, knowledge of medical terminology, and ability to communicate effectively with patients and colleagues. Although relevance and validity are related terms, they are operationally defined differently in this study. While relevance refers to the overall practicality and applicability of the exam in real-world practice, validity denotes the degree of accuracy and appropriateness of each question in measuring various dimensions of the learning objectives.

There is also evidence indicating that exit exams affect students' motivation in their academic pursuits (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; Brodersen & Lorenz, 2020; Hall et al., 2020). Motivation refers to the way exit exams drive students to be diligent in their studies by establishing clear expectations, holding them accountable for their learning, and preparing them for the future. Furthermore, exit exams can serve as a tool to help students identify their strengths and weaknesses by facilitating comparative analysis and promoting self-reflection (Holme et al., 2010; Jürges et al., 2012; Reardon et al., 2010). It is also noteworthy that the stress associated with exit exams is recognised as one of their side effects (Brodersen & Lorenz, 2020), which has been considered together with the four factors of the usefulness of exit exams. For instance, a recent study found that students with higher test anxiety scored significantly lower on the exit exam (Moore et al., 2021).

Review of Literature

The implementation of exit exams has been a contentious issue among educators, policymakers, and researchers for many years (French et al., 2024). Evidence suggests that exit exams are essential for achieving the objectives of institutions, programmes, and courses worldwide (Aniley, 2022). However, critics argue that these exams often disproportionately affect certain students, particularly minority and low-income students, who may lack access to high-quality educational resources (Al Ahmad et al., 2014; Brodersen & Lorenz, 2020; Marsidi, 2021). As a result, exit tests have been criticised for perpetuating existing educational inequalities and limiting opportunities for some students.

Despite these criticisms, proponents of exit exams argue that they ensure students are adequately prepared for the demands of post-secondary education or the labor market, providing a crucial level of accountability (Crave & Balestra, 2018). Greene and Winters (2005) assert that exit exams enhance students' performance, particularly in reading and mathematics. However, other scholars have raised concerns about the potential of teaching for the test and the emphasis on standardised test scores, which can result in the neglect of other essential learning outcomes, such as creativity and critical thinking (Kohn, 2000). Furthermore, students may experience significant stress and anxiety due to high-stakes exit tests, which can adversely affect their academic performance and overall well-being (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

One of the primary concerns among scholars regarding exit exams is their validity and reliability. According to Boroumandfar et al. (2016), exit exams often lack content validity, which refers to the ability to accurately measure

the knowledge, skills, and attitudes relevant to post-secondary education or the labor market. Additionally, various factors, including socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural aspects, can influence the accuracy of these exams (Carmen, 2011). As a result, scholars have advocated for the inclusion of more comprehensive and nuanced assessments of student learning, such as performance tasks and portfolio assessments, alongside exit exams (Wiggins, 1998).

Another area of interest for researchers is the impact of exit exams on student motivation and commitment. A study by Brodersen and Lorenz (2020) found that exit exams can undermine motivation and interest in learning. The high-stakes nature of these exams may create a sense of pressure that detracts from students' performance, leading to a focus on exam preparation rather than genuine learning and understanding (Demir and Keles, 2021). Furthermore, exit exams can contribute to labeling, where students who fail the test are branded as 'failures,' which may discourage them and lead to withdrawal from the educational process (Valencia, 2010). In contrast to these ideas, Hagos (2019) questions whether graduates of Ethiopian higher education possess the essential skills and proposes to introduce exit exams as evidence of students' competencies and to improve the quality of higher education.

In general, the literature on exit exams indicates that, while these assessments can offer certain advantages, such as enhancing accountability and ensuring that students are adequately prepared for higher education or the workforce—they also present several limitations. These limitations include the potential for teaching of the exam, the limited relevance of standardised test scores to real-world applications, and the detrimental effects on student motivation and engagement. Therefore, educational stakeholders should exercise caution when implementing exit exams and consider alternative assessment methods, such as performance-based and competency-based assessments, which emphasise in-depth learning and understanding over rote memorisation and testing (Demir and Keles, 2021). This approach would foster a fairer and more effective education system that equips students for success in the twenty-first century.

Research Questions

Given that exit exams can have both positive and negative impacts on students, this research aims to address the following specific questions: (a) How do students who took the exit exam perceive its usefulness, including aspects such as relevance, validity, motivating power, and self-awareness? (b) Is there a statistically significant difference in perception of exit exams

based on sex? (c) Can the stress caused by exit exams be predicted based on students' perceptions of the exam's relevance, validity, motivation, and self-awareness?

Methods

This study aimed to assess the usefulness of the exit exam from the students' perspectives. It employed a mixed-methods research approach utilising an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study population comprised regular undergraduate students who took the exit exam at Ambo University in July 2023. Participants for quantitative data collection were selected using a stratified random sampling method, while a convenience sampling method was employed to select participants for the interviews.

We initially planned to administer 280 copies of a questionnaire using CheckMarket's sample size calculator (<https://www.checkmarket.com/sample-size-calculator/>). The calculation was performed with a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence level. To achieve the desired number of participants, we distributed 300 copies of the questionnaire. However, we were only able to collect 208 completed questionnaires. Upon screening the returned copies, we found that 106 were defective or invalid. Given the limited number of initial respondents, we aimed to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon by gathering more nuanced and detailed data. Following the questionnaire data collection, we conducted in-depth interviews with eleven participants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relevant factors. In total, 113 participants contributed to this study. Participants included students from five academic streams and fourteen departments. In terms of gender composition, 62 males and 40 females participated in the quantitative portion of the study. Among the 11 interviewees, seven were female and four were male, representing students from eight different departments.

The researchers designed the questionnaire, which underwent rigorous validation through a combination of pilot testing and peer review. A pilot study was conducted with a sample of 33 participants, and the results were evaluated and refined by three expert reviewers. This pilot phase enabled us to validate the questionnaire and make necessary adjustments before proceeding with the main study. The original questionnaire consisted of 32 items, which were subsequently refined through pilot tests to eliminate items that did not significantly contribute to the study. Ultimately, 7 items were removed, resulting in a final questionnaire comprising 25 items.

After the pilot study, we conducted a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test to evaluate the adequacy of the sample and confirmed that the data were suitable for factor analysis (KMO = 0.64). Subsequently, as part of the pilot study, we performed an exploratory factor analysis to identify the primary factors of the questionnaire. The objective was to group similar items to create meaningful factors that could effectively capture the essence of respondents' perceptions. We employed Varimax rotation for the retained factors to simplify the structure of the coefficients and facilitate the interpretation of the results. The factor loadings were examined to determine the patterns of item correlations. Items with a loading of 0.4 or higher on a specific factor were considered part of that factor.

After analysis, five distinct factors emerged: the relevance of the exam, the validity of the exam, motivation, self-evaluation, and the stress it induces. Relevance: This factor encompassed items related to the perceived usefulness, importance, and applicability of the exam to the respondents' lives or careers. Validity: This factor included items that assessed respondents' perceptions of the exam's ability to measure various domains of learning objectives, the accuracy of the exam questions, and the fairness of the content covered in the curriculum. Motivation: This factor comprised items related to respondents' enthusiasm for preparing for and performing well on the exam, including goal-oriented behaviors. Self-awareness: This factor consisted of items that measured respondents' perceptions of whether the exam helped them understand their strengths and weaknesses during their time in college. Stress: This factor included items measuring respondents' anxiety, tension, and emotional distress regarding the test.

Finally, a questionnaire consisting of 25 items was employed, utilising a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to assess the various factors. Each of the five variables in the study was evaluated using four to five items. We also assessed the reliability of the instruments using Cronbach's alpha formula, yielding the following results: Relevance = 0.903, Validity = 0.862, Motivation = 0.868, Stress = 0.901, and Self-awareness = 0.853. Given that the study design followed an explanatory sequential method, an interview protocol was developed and implemented to explore students' perceptions and experiences regarding the exit exam. This protocol was informed by themes derived from the literature review and the questionnaire results. The interviews were unstructured and lasted approximately 15 to 25 minutes per participant. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 23. Descriptive statistics were employed to assess the ratings of questionnaire items related to relevance, validity, motivation, self-awareness, and stress. Additionally, a t-test was performed to compare the mean values of the variables measured by the questionnaire items, specifically examining gender differences between male and female students. Furthermore, correlation and regression were utilised to evaluate the relationships among the five variables addressed in this study. The interview data were analysed through thematic analysis, with transcripts coded and organised into themes and subthemes.

Based on the work of Oldenmenger et al. (2013), the mean value of the rating scale scores is classified as follows: a score between 3.75 and 5 indicates a high response, while a score between 2.25 and 3.74 is classified as medium, and a score from 1 to 2.4 is considered low for a single rating item. However, the specific values for each factor of the exit exam's relevance vary depending on the number of items included in each factor. Nonetheless, the general approach to establishing threshold values is based on the range of scores obtained from a five-point scale. A higher score suggests that the student perceives the exam as more relevant. A correlation matrix and regression analysis have been employed to explore the relationships between variables, enabling us to understand how changes in one variable relate to others. These analyses facilitate the identification of potential synergies and trade-offs, providing valuable insights into how modifications in one variable can impact related variables.

To ensure that data collection was conducted ethically, we did not pressure participants to participate in this study; rather, we invited everyone to take part voluntarily. We provided them with information about the study's purpose and how their data would be utilised. Additionally, we obtained oral consent from participants before collecting any data, as they were adults and the study posed no risk of harm to them. We assured them that their data would be treated confidentially and anonymously. We adhered to the ethical guidelines and standards for data collection established by our institution and relevant regulatory authorities. Overall, we ensured that the data collection process was conducted fairly and ethically, respecting the rights and autonomy of the participants. They were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences.

The present study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data collection process was constrained by time due to student withdrawals, which restricted the ability to recruit additional participants

and resulted in some incomplete data. This limited sample size and potential selection bias may have impacted the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data collection occurred during a period of intense media coverage and public opinion, which may have led to a distorted or biased perception of the exam. As a result, the perceptions and attitudes of students regarding the exit test may not be entirely objective, but rather influenced by prevailing public sentiment and media narratives

Findings

In this section, we examine the results of the study from students' perspectives regarding the usefulness of exit exams, presented in both numerical and narrative formats. Analysing these findings may enhance our understanding of how students perceive the subject.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perception of the Pertinence of the Exit Exam

Variables	Frequency	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Response category
Relevance	93	6	30	21.06	6.09	Moderate
Validity	98	5	25	14.76	4.95	Moderate
Motivation	90	5	25	18.78	4.98	High
Self-awareness	101	4	20	15.37	4.01	High
Stress	96	5	23	15.40	3.92	Moderate

A descriptive statistical analysis of the study is presented in Table 1. The data illustrate how students perceive the usefulness of the exit exam across four factors as well as its stress-related issues. The frequency column indicates the number of students who responded to each scale item. The minimum and maximum columns display the lowest and highest scores recorded. The mean column represents the average score of students for items measuring each factor. The standard deviation column indicates the extent to which the scores deviate from the mean. The response category column classifies the mean score for each variable into three levels.

When considering students' perceptions of the relevance of the exit exam, the mean score for relevance is ($M = 21.06$), with a standard deviation is ($S.d. = 6.09$). This indicates that the majority of students (68%) view the exit exam as moderately relevant to the curriculum. However, the standard deviation of 6.09 suggests a diversity of opinions on this matter. Some

students may have found the exam to be highly relevant, while others may have deemed it to be of little relevance.

Regarding the validity of the exam, the mean score is 14.76, with a standard deviation is 4.95. This suggests that most students (60%) perceived the exit exam as moderately valid in measuring student learning. However, the high standard deviation indicates a wide range of perceptions, with some students considering the test very valid while others viewed it as less valid. Although there were no complaints from students regarding the exam's relevance, significant concerns were raised about its validity. For instance, a participant from the Industrial Engineering programme reported that part of their exam was copied directly from the internet and did not align with the exam blueprint. In the words of the participant:

To prepare for the exit exam, I practiced with questions available online. Fortunately, the same questions appeared on the exit exam, making it relatively easy for me. Almost everyone who did not practice with the online questions failed the exit exam. Therefore, I suggest that the exam be genuinely curriculum-based and capable of assessing students' professional competence.

Similarly, a participant from the Department of Educational Planning and Management provided the following response:

I have successfully passed the exit exam. I attribute my success to the fact that I did not limit my preparation to just the blueprint. Had I concentrated solely on the blueprint, like some of my peers, I doubt I would have passed the exam. Instead, I embraced a comprehensive approach, diligently studying all the courses without any restrictions. This commitment to my studies is why I achieved success. Many students who focused exclusively on the blueprint did not pass.

Regarding the motivating effect of the exit exam, the mean score is 18.78, indicating that a majority of students (78%) felt motivated by the exam. This suggests that students generally perceive the exit exam as a strong incentive to work diligently to pass. This is a positive finding, as it implies that students are largely in favor of exit exams. However, there was a range of opinions on this matter, with a standard deviation of 4.98, indicating that some students were not motivated to take the exam.

The data related to self-awareness indicates that the mean score is 15.37, demonstrating that the majority of students (76%) felt the exit exam provided

them with a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as learners. This is a positive finding, as it suggests that students believe exit exams can be beneficial for promoting self-sufficiency. However, the standard deviation of 4.01 indicates that some students may not have felt that the exam accurately assessed their academic capabilities.

The mean stress score is 15.4, indicating that the majority of students (72%) found the exam to be moderately stressful. The standard deviation of 3.92 suggests a wide range of perspectives on this issue. This implies that while some students may experience significant stress regarding the exam, others may feel little to no stress at all. Factors contributing to this stress may include students' anxiety about the exam, their perception of its importance, and their confidence in their abilities. Overall, a descriptive statistical analysis of the data reveals that students generally view the exit exam positively, although it is also associated with stress.

Table 2: Sex Differences in the Students' Perceptions of the Exit Exam

Variables	Male		Female		Df	T-value	P-value	Cohen d-test
	FQ	Mean	FQ	Mean				
Relevance	49	22.04	34	19.47	81	1.92	0.58	0.43
Validity	59	17.29	39	15.95	96	1.32	0.19	0.27
Motivation	53	18.77	37	17.41	88	1.29	0.20	0.28
Self-awareness	61	15.18	40	13.13	99	2.59	0.01	0.53
Stress	50	14.12	36	16.36	84	-1.32	0.04	0.32

The results of an independent t-test examining gender differences in student perceptions of the usefulness of the exit exam are presented in Table 2. The findings indicate a significant difference only in the factors of self-awareness and stress. With a 95-percent confidence interval, the values are likely to encompass the true difference in mean scores between the two groups. This suggests that the true mean difference in self-reported self-awareness lies between 13.13 and 15.18 points, while the difference in stress levels ranges from 14.12 to 16.36 points.

In other words, the t-test results indicate statistically significant gender differences in student perceptions of the exit exam regarding two variables: self-awareness and stress. Males had a higher mean score than females in self-awareness, while females had a higher mean score than males in stress. This suggests that the exam made males more aware of their strengths and

weaknesses compared to females and that they experienced greater stress than their male counterparts. These differences can be attributed to various factors, including a sense of competence, social expectations, gender stereotypes, and the unique educational challenges that women face.

To supplement these findings, data collected through interviews further supports the results. For instance, one female participant from the Department of Accounting and Finance stated:

Our families eagerly anticipate our graduation and securing employment. If we fail this exam, our families' hopes will be in vain. Once again, we risk becoming a financial burden to them. Therefore, we have a significant amount of work ahead of us. Some of my friends are feeling extremely stressed and anxious about this exit exam.

A participant from the Pharmacy Department also stated that the exit exam was not beneficial to her and that she did not perceive any added value in the exam. She said: "We have a comprehensive exam to take. Consequently, I believe that preparing for this exam is a waste of time and effort. It neither enhances my knowledge and skills nor benefits my profession; instead, it only adds to my stress."

Table 3: Correlations Among Students' Perceptions of Exit Exam Outcomes

	Relevance	Validity	Motivation	Self-awareness	Stress
Relevance	1				
Validity	0.592**	1			
Motivation	0.705**	0.670**	1		
Self-awareness	0.657**	0.711**	0.750**	1	
Stress	0.298*	0.243*	0.389**	0.249*	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficients between students' perspectives on relevance, validity, motivation, self-awareness, and the stress induced by the exit exam are presented in Table 3. The objective of this analysis is to understand the strength of the relationships among the factors of the study. The findings indicate that all correlation coefficients are positive, although not all are strong. The strongest correlations are observed between relevance and validity ($r = 0.592$), motivation and relevance ($r = 0.705$), self-awareness and relevance ($r = 0.657$), motivation and validity ($r = 0.670$), validity and

self-awareness ($r = 0.711$), and motivation and self-awareness ($r = 0.750$). These strong correlation coefficients suggest significant relationships among the factors under investigation.

The relevance of the exit exam is positively associated with its validity and students' self-awareness. This suggests that when the exit exam is perceived as relevant, it is also viewed as more valid, leading to a greater understanding of oneself. Furthermore, the correlations indicate a strong positive relationship between motivation, relevance, and self-awareness, suggesting that students who are highly motivated by the exit exam are more likely to perceive it as relevant and to have a better understanding of themselves.

Table 4: Predicting Stress by Exit Exam from Exit Exam Outcomes

	Coefficient	Beta	SE	p-value	R ² -value
Predictors	9.988		1.755	.000	0.151
Relevance	.054	.084	.105	.613	
Validity	.029	.006	.138	.998	
Motivation	.326	.416	.147	.030	
Self-awareness	-.126	-.134	.196	.522	

Dependent Variable: stress

Predictors: self-awareness, relevance, validity, motivation

The data presented in Table 4 illustrate the results of multiple regression analysis, indicating that students' perceptions of the utility of exit exams—specifically relevance, validity, motivation, and self-awareness—predict their stress levels. The table includes the coefficient, beta value, standard error (SE), p-value, and R² value for each predictor. The constant is 9.988, which suggests that if the exit exam were not perceived as relevant, valid, motivating, or insightful, the average stress level would be 9.988 according to the following regression model: $y = b_0 + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 + b_4x_4 + e$. This model can be expressed as stress = 9.988 + relevance (0.054) + validity (0.029) + motivation (0.326) + self-awareness (0.126) + 1.755.

The multiple regression coefficient for the relevance variable is 0.054, indicating that for every one-unit increase in the relevance of the exit exam, the stress level is expected to decrease by 0.054 units. However, the p-value for this coefficient is 0.613, which exceeds the threshold of 0.05, suggesting that the coefficient is not statistically significant. The coefficient

for the validity variable is 0.029, with a p-value of 0.998, also greater than 0.05. This indicates that the validity of the exit exam does not significantly predict stress levels. In contrast, the coefficient for the motivation variable is 0.326, suggesting that the stress level is expected to decrease by 0.326 units. The p-value for this coefficient is 0.030, which is less than 0.05, indicating that it is statistically significant in predicting stress levels. Lastly, the coefficient for the self-awareness variable is -0.126, implying that the stress level is expected to increase by 0.126 units. However, the p-value for this coefficient is 0.522, which is greater than 0.05, indicating a lack of statistical significance.

Among the factors of perceived usefulness, motivation derived from the exit exam has emerged as the sole predictor of student stress. The beta value represents the standardized coefficient, indicating the relative contribution of each predictor to the dependent variable, while the standard error (SE) measures the variability of the coefficient estimate. The R² value reflects the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the predictors. The R² value for the entire model is 0.151, which indicates that 15.1% of the variance in students' stress levels during exit exams can be attributed to relevance, validity, motivation, and self-awareness. This suggests that, when holding other factors constant, students' perceptions of these variables can account for 15.1% of their performance on the exit test.

Discussion

College exit exams have become a crucial component of the education system, designed to assess students' knowledge and skills before they enter the workforce. However, students' perceptions of these exams are significant. The purpose of this article is to explore students' perceptions of the usefulness of exit exams, which can be analysed through five outcomes. Regarding students' views on the usefulness of exit exams, they generally perceive them positively, with ratings ranging from moderate to high (Mandernach, 2015). This aligns with previous research that underscores the importance of assessment in higher education. A positive perception of these exams can play a vital role in enhancing student performance, supporting Tamrat's (2023) argument that the introduction of such tests has increased the likelihood of improving performance at the national, institutional, and individual levels.

This positive perception can be attributed to students' understanding that the purpose of the exit exam is to assess their knowledge and skills for career success. While this positive attitude enhances student performance,

evidence indicates that those who excel before leaving school are more likely to succeed in the real world (Riley et al., 2023). Furthermore, the exam's relevance is often bolstered by the inclusion of practical exercises and case studies, which reflect real-world challenges and future industries (Schilling, 2007). In support of this argument, students' recognition of the exam underscores its indispensability in improving their knowledge and skills, thereby preparing them for future careers.

Although both male and female students are highly motivated to take the exit exam, female students are more likely to experience higher levels of stress related to their preparation and performance. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that female students tend to experience greater stress and anxiety in academic settings (e.g., McCurdy et al., 2022; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2010). These studies suggest that a widespread perception of female incompetence, coupled with heightened sensitivity to competitive pressure, may contribute to this outcome. Furthermore, this difference may be attributed to the perceived expectations among male peers, possibly stemming from the belief that society places less pressure on men regarding academic achievement (Khalil et al., 2022; Machin et al., 2020), resulting in reduced pressure on their academic performance.

The study also found that among the factors of usefulness the exit exam—such as relevance, validity, motivation, and self-evaluation—only the motivation associated with the exam predicts students' stress levels during their preparation. This suggests that the more students perceive a test as difficult to pass, the more motivated they become to study and prepare, which significantly determines their stress levels. This finding aligns with the theory of self-determination, which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for motivation and well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The fact that motivation is the sole predictor of stress levels indicates that educators and policymakers should prioritise designing assessments that foster intrinsic motivation and engagement, rather than merely emphasising the relevance or validity of the test. This approach has a profound impact on the emotional and psychological stress experienced by students when confronted with academic pressure.

The results of the study have significant implications for developing strategies to reduce stress levels among students. By emphasising the motivational aspects of the exit exam, educators can help students cultivate a growth mindset, viewing the exam as an opportunity for growth and development rather than a source of stress and anxiety (Valencia, 2010). The findings also underscore the necessity for educators to consider the

differing impacts of assessments on male and female students and to create targeted interventions to support those who may experience higher levels of stress. Additionally, the results provide valuable insights into college students' perspectives on exit tests and highlight gender differences. By recognising the potential benefits and drawbacks of exit exams, educators and policymakers can collaborate to design assessments that foster motivation, engagement, and well-being among students. Considering various factors, Tamirat (2024) advocates for a more comprehensive investigation into the nuances of exit exams within the Ethiopian context.

Conclusions

This study was conducted to gain a better understanding of student's perspectives on the relevance, validity, motivational capacity, self-awareness potential, and stress-inducing nature of exit exams. The aim is to provide insights into whether exams fulfill their intended purpose and, if not, how they can be improved. The results of the study indicated that students generally hold a positive perception of the outcomes of the exams. They believe that exams are relevant to their fields of study, valid in assessing their performance, and capable of motivating them to study harder. Additionally, students feel that exams offer valuable self-awareness into their strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to enhance their performance in the future. Despite students' positive perceptions of the exit exam, it is also viewed as stressful, particularly for female students, due to its tendency to motivate them to succeed. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that students maintain positive perceptions regarding the exam's relevance.

However, the study also identified a gender difference in the perception of self-awareness and the stress-inducing nature of exams. Female students appeared to experience more stress than their male counterparts and were less likely to view exams as a means of identifying their strengths and weaknesses. This finding is particularly concerning, as stress can negatively impact students' academic performance and mental health. Therefore, it is essential to address the stressful nature of exams for female students. Strategies could include providing additional support and resources to help them manage stress and anxiety or incorporating more diverse and inclusive exam materials to enhance self-awareness for all students.

The study's findings underscore the importance of considering students' perspectives when designing and administering exams. By understanding their perceptions of the examination process, educators can enhance its value, motivate students, and reduce stress for all students, regardless of gender. Ultimately, this approach will contribute to creating a positive and supportive learning environment that fosters both academic success

and personal growth. Given that issues related to exit exams are relatively new, there are numerous potential research areas to explore concerning exit exams and student achievement. Notably, these include the impact on students and educators, item analysis, demographic considerations, educational equity, and other related issues surrounding exit exams

References

- Al Ahmad, M., Al Marzouqi, A. H., & Hussien, M. (2014). Exit exam as academic performance indicator. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 13(3), 58–67.
- Aniley, A. A. (2022). Comprehensive review on exit examination strategies and its role for enhancement of quality assurance and employability opportunity in Engineering and Technology Programs. *IETE Journal of Education*, 64(1), 41–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09747338.2022.2118874>
- Ayeneu, E., & Gebre Yohannes, A. (2022). Assessing higher education exit exam in Ethiopia: Practices, challenges and prospects. *American Journal of Applied Psychology*, 10(2), 79–86. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.sjedu.20221002.15>
- Boroumandfar, Z., Khorvash, F., Taeri, K., Salehi, M., & Yadegarfar, G. (2016). Validity and reliability of knowledge, attitude and behavior assessment tool among vulnerable women concerning sexually transmitted diseases. *Journal of Family & Reproductive Health*, 10(1), 9–14.
- Brodersen, L., & Lorenz, R. (2020). Perceived stress, physiological stress reactivity, and exit exam performance in a pre-licensure Bachelor of Science nursing program. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, 17(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijnes-2019-0121>
- Carmen, F. (2011). The role of assessment in the student learning process. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, 38(2), 157–162. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jvme.38.2.157>
- Crave, S. L., & Balestra, M. L. (2018). Using HESI exit exams to predict NCLEX-RN success: A systematic review. *Nurse Education Today*, 66, 57–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.03.007>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Demir, C. G., & Keles, O. P. (2021). The impact of high-stakes testing on the teaching and learning processes of mathematics. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 5(2), 119–137. <http://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2021269677>
- El-Hassan, H., Hamouda, M., El-Maaddawy, T., & Maraqa, M. (2021). Curriculum-based exit exam for assessment of student learning. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 46(6), 849–873. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2021.1920892>
- French, S., Dickerson, A. & Mulder, R. A. (2024). A review of the benefits and drawbacks of high-stakes final examinations in higher education. *High Educ*, 88, 893–918. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01148-z>
- Greene, J. P., & Forster, G. (2005). Public high school graduation and college readiness rates: 1991–2002. Education Working Paper Archive.
- Hagos, B. 2019. University exit examination in Ethiopia: Strategies for institutionalization and implementation. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361094060_University_Exit_Examination_in_Ethiopia_Strategies_for_Institutionalization_and_Implementation
- Hall, J., Lacombe, D., & Pokharel, S. B. (2020). State exit exams and graduation rates: A hierarchical SLX modelling approach. *Review of Regional Studies*, 50(2), 189–206. <https://doi.org/10.52324/001C.12636>
- Holme, J. J., Richards, M. P., Jimerson, J. B., & Cohen, R. W. (2010). Assessing the effects of high school exit examinations. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(4), 476–526. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654310383147>
- Jürges, H., Schneider, K., Senkbeil, M., & Carstensen, C. H. (2012). Assessment drives learning: The effect of central exit exams on curricular knowledge and mathematical literacy. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(1), 56–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.08.007>
- Khalil, N., Aljanazrah, A., Hamed, G., & Murtagh, E. (2022). Exploring teacher educators' perspectives of play-based learning: A mixed method approach. *Education Sciences*, 12(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12020095>
- Kohn, A. (2000). The case against standardized testing. In A. Kohn (Ed.), *The case against standardized testing* (pp. 1–12). Heinemann.
- Langford, R., & Young, A. (2013). Predicting NCLEX-RN success with the HESI exit exam: Eighth validity study. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 29(25), 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2012.06.007>
- Maag Merki, K., & Holmeier, M. (2015). Comparability of semester and exit exam grades: Long-term effect of the implementation of state-wide exit exams. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 26(1), 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2013.861353>
- Machin, S., McNally, S., & Ruiz-valenzuela, J. (2020). Entry through the narrow door: The costs of just failing high stakes exams.

- Journal of Public Economics*, 190, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104224>
- Mandernach, B. J. (2015). Assessment of student engagement in higher education: A synthesis of literature and assessment tools. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 12(2), 1–14.
- Marsidi, S. R. (2021). Identification of stress, anxiety, and depression levels of students in preparation for the exit exam competency test. *Journal of Vocational Health Studies*, 5(2), 87–93. <https://doi.org/10.20473/jvhs.v5.i2.2021.87-93>
- McCurdy, B. H., Scozzafava, M. D., Bradley, T., Matlow, R., Weems, C. F., & Carrion, V. G. (2022). Impact of anxiety and depression on academic achievement among underserved school children: Evidence of suppressor effects. *Current psychology*, 42, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03801-9>
- Moore, L. C., Goldsberry, J., Fowler, C., & Handwerker, S. (2021). Academic and nonacademic predictors of BSN student success on the HESI exit exam. *Computers, Informatics, Nursing*, 39(10), 570–577. <https://doi.org/10.1097/cin.0000000000000741>
- Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2007). *Collateral damage: How high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*. Harvard Education Press.
- Niederle, M., & Vesterlund, L. (2010). Explaining the gender gap in math test scores: The role of competition. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 24(2), 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.24.2.129>
- Oldenmenger, W. H., De Raaf, P. J., De Klerk, C., & Van Der Rijt, C. C. D. (2013). Cut points on 0–10 numeric rating scales for symptoms included in the edmonton symptom assessment scale in cancer patients: A systematic review. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, 45(6), 1083–1093. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2012.06.007>
- Palmer, E. J., Duggan, P., Devitt, P. G., & Russell, R. (2010). The modified essay question: Its exit from the exit examination. *Medical Teacher*, 32(7), e300–e307. <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2010.488705>
- Reardon, S. F., Arshan, N., Atteberry, A., & Kurlaender, M. (2010). Effects of failing a high school exit exam on course taking, achievement, persistence, and graduation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 32(4), 498–520. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373710382655>
- Riley, T. A., Gouveia, C., Baker, R. S., Ruiz, K., & San Pedro, M. O. Z. (2023). Supporting student success on the practical nurse (PN) licensure exam: The health education systems incorporated (HESI) PN exit exam study. *Nurse Education Today*, 121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2022.105669>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *The American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Schilling, S. G. (2007). The role of psychometric modeling in test validation: An application of multidimensional item response theory. *Measurement: Interdisciplinary Research and Perspectives*, 5(2–3), 93–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15366360701487021>
- Schlemer, L., & Waldorf, D. (2010). Testing the test: Validity and reliability of senior exit exam. *ASEE Annual Conference and Exposition, Conference Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.18260/1-2-16563>
- Schumacker, R. E., Wind, S. A., & Holmes, L. F. (2021). Resources for identifying measurement instruments for social science research. *Measurement: Interdisciplinary Research and Perspectives*, 19(4), 250–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15366367.2021.1950486>
- Tamrat, W. (2023). *With more work, exit exam may become quality building block*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230726115440493>
- Tamrat, W. 2024. *Addressing poor pass rate in HE exit exam remains urgent*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240417140934766>
- Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: The role of culture, language, and class*. Routledge.
- Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative assessment: Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance*. Jossey-Bass.