
Analysing Ethiopia's Two-Year General Secondary School Leaving Exams: Using Cheating and Assessment Lenses*Tefera Tadesse¹, Belay Hagos² and Shewatatek Gedamu³*Received: 21 November 2023; Accepted: 22 May 2024***Overview**

Exam cheating and malpractice are on the rise among high school students around the globe, including among those in Ethiopia. Educational authorities viewed them as major threats to both national security and high-quality education. Exam cheating and malpractice are never acceptable due to their immediate and long-term unfavourable consequences. The Ethiopian Ministry of Education has moved the administration and invigilation of the general secondary school leaving exams from secondary schools to public universities and their teachers to control exam malpractice and curb exam cheating. The universities also further provide remedial interventions for those who were marginally successful students. Despite the significant financial consequences and difficulties in implementing the plan, the Ministry and its educational experts feel that this strict anti-exam malpractice and cheating strategy is the best way to prevent exam malpractice and cheating and guarantee that universities only admit applicants who authentically pass their exams. Nevertheless, the shift also indicated a performance shock, with more than 96% of exam takers failing to pass the exams. It was deceptive for the Ministry to solely announce the extent of the failure

* *The statements and views reflected in this short communication article are the authors' responsibility*

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without doing a more thorough analysis of its circumstances, factors, and consequences. This brief communication analyses this terrible two-year performance via the lenses of cheating and learning assessment, primarily focusing on the change itself, the untold stories, our perspectives, lessons learned, and practical recommendations for a better future.

Academic Cheating: The Global Perspective and the Local Context

Cheating is widespread among high school students worldwide, including those in Ethiopia. There are several ways that students cheat: alone, with friends, with parents, and occasionally even in cooperation with teachers and school administrators ([Davis et al., 2011](#)). In a 2011 survey involving over 3,600 high school students in the US, it was found that 95% of the participants had cheated in some way ([Wangaard & Stephens, 2011](#)). Also, in the 2015 academic season, China used drones to combat college entrance exam cheating ([Clark & Soutter, 2016](#)). Moreover, in a Kenyan secondary school, exam question leaks for financial gain, copying from someone else's exam script, and exam officials working together with school administration and law enforcement were most prevalent ([Ojwan'g, 2019](#)). Similarly, research conducted in Ethiopia reveals that 80% of secondary school students engaged in academic cheating ([Dejene, 2021](#)). These findings serve as a painful reminder of the pervasiveness of cheating.

The act of cheating has been associated with various individual and situational characteristics. Lack of preparation and an obsession with grades were the primary factors from the students' perspective ([Ojwan'g, 2019](#)). Another factor was the fear of failing exams; at least in certain cases, difficult exams may indirectly contribute to cheating ([Wenzel & Reinhard, 2020](#)). Additionally, peer behaviour has a significant influence ([Tsai, 2012](#); [Zhao et al., 2022](#)); opportunities can produce cheaters ([Sorgo et al., 2015](#)).

In Ethiopian secondary schools, exam malpractice and exam cheating have long been unresolved problems. The main contributing factors included poor school environments, low levels of awareness of cheating in society and among students, inadequate exam preparation and management, dishonest behaviour by public figures, and students' pursuit of higher education ([Demelash & Chinasho, 2022](#)). Furthermore, the lack of suitable examination rooms, social connections, insufficient monitoring and supervision, and parental pressure all played a part ([Chala & Agago, 2022](#)). Hence, there are usually a lot of complex and varied underlying factors for academic cheating.

Cheating when caught is consequential. The worst penalties for cheating were thought to include exam result cancellation, fines, imprisonment, and prohibition ([Ojwan'g, 2019](#)). Nevertheless, increasing the penalties - while a useful deterrent - may not always be the best way to combat cheating in secondary education ([Awad et al., 2013](#)). Comparatively, prevention is a more proactive approach with greater efficacy and lower costs because it involves taking action before cheating ([DiPietro, 2010](#)). For example, the enthusiasm of teachers may help in the prevention of academic cheating. According to research, cheating and general teacher enthusiasm are directly and negatively associated ([Orosz et al., 2015](#)). This suggests that teachers' perceived enthusiasm can be a significant interpersonal factor that could successfully prevent academic cheating.

Results, Mistakes, and Failures

In Ethiopia, 896,520 students and 845,188 students took the national school-leaving exams in 2022 and 2023 respectively. Only 30,034 (3.3%) and 27,267 (3.2%) of them achieved a passing grade of greater than 50% for the academic years 2022 and 2023 respectively. Reducing cheating was another achievement of Ethiopia's Ministry of Education. Based on official figures, the number of students who cheated decreased from 20,170 cases last year to 859 this year.

When viewed in a different light, the two-year miserable failure of over 96% illustrates a "performance shock." According to the press release of the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, over a thousand general secondary schools have failed to pass even a single student. The Ministry held everyone accountable for the failure. But who failed is the key question here. *Have the schools themselves or the system failed?* The fact that more than a thousand general secondary schools (above 40%) have failed to pass even one student suggests that there may be a systemic rather than a school-level problem. Therefore, the Ministry of Education ought to be primarily accountable for more than just revealing the magnitude of its failure last year and this year.

Still another critical issue that needs further thought is *Anyway, which group was at fault - the exams or the learners?* Has this disastrous failure occurred, for example, due to the questions and exam design, the exam environment, or the group members who prepared the exams? The press release of the Ministry has not sufficiently clarified this. In the absence of empirical evidence, it is wrong to blame students or praise the Ministry for the diminishing numbers of exam cheating cases as this conceals problems related to the development of the exams and other systematic problems.

Moreover, even if the full impact of this change initiative could not have been determined because of insufficient evidence about its efficacy and implementation, there might be other unintended consequences of the unprecedented exam administration strategies. For instance, we discovered that most students who took exams last year and this year thought the week-long stay on the campuses of public universities was a complete nightmare. The primary complaints included: a scarcity of food, sleep, and hydration. A growing body of evidence indicates that our diet and hydration have an impact on both our physical and mental performance ([Beezhold et al., 2017](#); [Masento et al., 2014](#)). Also, other complaints included contextual disparities; inadequate catering; unjust use of polices; students' lack of familiarity with the area and campus life; and mental health issues brought about by in-campus housing situations

during the exam period. How were the exams for secondary school leavers prepared? Was the exam prepared to assess performance or aptitude? This is yet another crucial question that requires sufficient evidence from each subject's exam blueprint. Achievement tests are intended to gauge students' knowledge gained in the classroom or track their long-term academic development ([Stringer, 2008](#)). There are negative effects when this is skewed because of an aptitude examination that gauges potential.

Of course, exam administration and remedial interventions for marginally successful students seem to be managed fairly well by universities, but the larger picture of these efforts needs to be considered because they may undermine secondary school teachers' ownership and public support for the ongoing fight against academic cheating. From our perspective, the Ministry's decision to shift exam administration and invigilation from secondary schools to public universities, exemplifying 'deterrent control,' ([Zimring & Hawkins, 1973](#)) is an administrative mechanism that is necessary but insufficient to effectively curb academic dishonesty in our secondary schools. Therefore, to improve standards and discourage academic cheating, long-term solutions require more than simply putting into practice what 'works' in the short term, as the Ethiopian Ministry of Education did.

Furthermore, to fully comprehend this disastrous two-year failure, it is imperative to understand the school context in Ethiopia, including the students' chronically low performance in middle and high school, as well as their lack of interest and commitment to learning ([Mekuria et al., 2018](#)). Also, it is necessary to understand that a school's quality cannot be determined by its students' exam results alone ([Stringer, 2008](#)). Given the challenges deeply ingrained in our education system and its secondary schools, we feel that the recent disappointing results of the general secondary school exams are a sign that, if nothing is done as we have done over the last two years, the worst is yet to come.

The Way Forward

We provide four practical suggestions to mitigate the challenges and maintain academic integrity in our secondary school environments.

How Can We Transform a Failed Secondary School into a Successful One?

The topic of *how to transform a failed secondary school into a successful one* remains crucial. According to research, there are substantial negative correlations between the three dimensions of school effectiveness (including school leadership, teacher cooperation and consensus, and school ethos) and student cheating, suggesting that these factors should be taken into account when working toward the creation of a more ethical, just, and fair educational system ([Ramberg & Modin, 2019](#)). Additionally, it is necessary that we create a rational, all-encompassing, and systematic approach that declares that school cheating is immoral and unethical behaviour, firmly condemns cheating, and aligns teachers' efforts to end school cheating with students' ([Bajtoš, 2020](#)). Hence, intervention toward building an assessment culture is truly relevant. Ethiopia must gradually adopt a long-term, coherent strategy to enhance student learning outcomes and ensure sustainability.

Academic Honesty: An Important Task for Our Secondary Schools

It's possible that the educational setting in which students have been taught thus far promotes cheating and even helps them get socialized to do so by failing to emphasize the importance of academic integrity and by not enforcing consequences for cheating ([DiPietro, 2010](#)). Thus, situational, and behavioural aspects should be addressed to prevent cheating. A comprehensive character education that considers the four dimensions of character—moral, civic, performance, and intellectual—might provide additional strategies for promoting academic integrity and student honesty ([Clark & Soutter, 2016](#)). In early childhood education, character and other fundamental skill development should be prioritized.

Cultural socialization, for instance, teaches kids values like social responsibility, honesty, honour, respect, genuineness, and the courage to stand up for what is right. Other strategies include implementing preventative measures, building trust, and promoting relationships between students and teachers ([Morris, 2018](#); [Sefcik et al., 2020](#)). Additionally, a 'multilevel intervention model' fosters an atmosphere of integrity using individual, context-specific, and whole-school strategies ([Stephens, 2016](#)).

A Set of Proposed Learning Assessment Standards

We are unsure of whether educators and other stakeholders involved in Ethiopia's General Secondary Schools understand that the current plan to replace the invigilators and host exam administration is only workable temporarily. In particular, the Ministry should focus on developing a set of guidelines for exam development that cover everything from the purpose of the exam to post-examination analysis. Additionally, the Ministry needs to pay close attention to concerns regarding the reliability, validity, and fairness of exams. Furthermore, empirical data is required to verify if schools informed students about these assessment requirements at the start of the academic year and whether the study guides also provide information about them. However, implementation calls for financing, opportunities for teacher and partner professional development, and time for the creation, use, and item analysis of valid and reliable assessment tools.

The Need for Future Research

The intended and unintended consequences of the current exam cheating intervention measure on the students who sat the exams, the students who will take it next, and the hosting schools need to be thoroughly examined to understand their views of the failure and its triggering factors and its impacts on the implementation of teaching and learning.

'Why do students cheat?' (Brimble, 2016) or 'What motivates academic dishonesty in students (Bacon et al., 2020) is a query that is frequently asked in research on student academic cheating. However, the literature currently lacks a thorough investigation of the fundamental reason why they don't (Bretag, 2020; Miller et al., 2011; Rundle et al., 2020). These require further consideration.

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