

## Higher education exit exams and labor market readiness: A systematic review

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – Exit exams are a critical component of higher education systems worldwide, serving as a benchmark for assessing students' readiness for graduation and professional practice. However, the relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness remains underexplored. This systematic literature review aims to examine the role of exit exams in preparing students for the labor market, focusing on their impact on employability, skill acquisition, and career readiness.

**Method** – Using the PRISMA framework and PICO strategy, the researcher conducted a comprehensive search across multiple databases, identifying relevant studies published between 1994 and 2024. The PRISMA framework followed identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion stages. The PICO framework was used to structure the research questions by breaking them down into four components: Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome. The review synthesizes findings from 31 studies, highlighting the dual role of exit exams as both a motivator for academic achievement and a source of labor market preparedness.

**Findings** – The results indicate that while exit exams can enhance educational outcomes, their impact on labor market readiness is influenced by a variety of factors, including the alignment of exam content with industry needs, the level of support provided to students, and the cultural context in which the exams are administered. The discussion section delves into the implications of these findings for educational policy and practice, suggesting strategies to enhance the labor market readiness of graduates. This review underscores the need for a balanced approach to exit exams that prioritizes both academic rigor and career preparedness.

**Keywords:** employability, exit exams, higher education, labor market readiness, skill acquisition

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## INTRODUCTION

Exit exams, also known as comprehensive or final examinations, are a cornerstone of higher education systems globally (Teshome, S. W. 2025). These exams are designed to assess students' mastery of the curriculum and their readiness for professional practice. While exit exams serve as a critical quality assurance mechanism, their role in preparing students for the labor market remains a topic of significant interest and debate. This

systematic literature review aims to explore the relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness, with a particular focus on employability, skill acquisition, and career preparedness.

The importance of exit exams in higher education cannot be overstated (Teshome, S. W. 2025). They are often seen as a final hurdle that students must overcome to demonstrate their competence and readiness for the workforce. However, the extent to which these exams contribute to labor market readiness is a complex and multifaceted issue. Studies have shown that while exit exams can enhance educational outcomes, their impact on employability and career readiness is influenced by a variety of factors, including the alignment of exam content with industry needs, the level of support provided to students, and the cultural context in which the exams are administered (Ackeren et al., 2012; Adale & Kefale, 2023).

The relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness has garnered significant attention in recent years, as educators and policymakers seek to align academic assessments with workforce demands. While exit exams are designed to certify that students meet specific academic standards, their influence on employability, skill acquisition, and career preparedness remains a topic of debate. Recent studies highlight both the potential benefits and drawbacks of these exams, emphasizing their role in shaping students' transition from education to employment (Aniley, 2023; Teshome, 2024).

The purpose of this review is to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature on the relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness. By examining the findings of previous studies, we aim to identify patterns and trends that can inform future research and policy decisions. Specifically, this review seeks to answer the following research questions, (1) What is the impact of exit exams on students' employability?, (2) How do exit exams affect students' skill acquisition?, (3) What are the broader implications of exit exams for students' career readiness?

To answer these questions, we conducted a systematic literature review using the PRISMA framework and PICO strategy. Our search identified 30 relevant studies published between 1994 and 2024, which were analyzed to extract key findings related to the research questions. The results of this review are presented in a thematic synthesis, followed by a discussion of the implications for educational policy and practice.

The findings of this review have important implications for educators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders. By understanding the relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness, we can develop strategies to enhance the employability and career preparedness of graduates. This review also highlights the need for further research on the role of exit exams in preparing students for the labor market, particularly in diverse cultural and educational contexts.

In conclusion, exit exams play a critical role in higher education, but their impact on labor market readiness is influenced by a variety of factors. This review aims to shed light on the complex relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness, providing valuable insights for educators and policymakers. By addressing the challenges associated

with exit exams, we can create a more balanced and supportive educational system that prioritizes both academic achievement and career preparedness.

## METHOD

This systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework strategy to ensure a comprehensive and structured approach to identifying and analyzing relevant studies. The methodology section outlines the search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data extraction process, and quality assessment. PICO framework was used to structure the research questions by breaking them down into four key components: (Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome).

The search strategy was designed to identify all relevant studies published between 1994 and 2024 that examined the relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness, with a focus on employability, skill acquisition, and career preparedness. The following databases were searched: PubMed, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The search terms used included: "exit exams," "final examinations," "labor market readiness," "employability," "skill acquisition," "career readiness," and "higher education." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine search terms and refine the results.

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: If the study is on higher education, written on exit exams, and written in English. Studies were excluded if they focused on primary or secondary education, did not report on labor market readiness outcomes, or were not peer-reviewed. Data extraction was conducted using a standardized form that included the following information: authors and year, objective of the study, methodology used, country, exit exam and labor market readiness. The extracted data were organized in a tabular format for ease of analysis.

Studies were rated as high, medium, or low quality based on their methodological rigor, relevance to the research questions, and overall contribution to the field. The PRISMA diagram ([Figure 1](#)) illustrates the flow of information through the different phases of the systematic review, including the number of studies identified, screened, eligible, and included in the review.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results section presents the findings of the systematic literature review in [table 1](#), followed by a thematic synthesis of the extracted information.

### Thematic Analysis

The thematic synthesis of the extracted information reveals several key themes related to the impact of exit exams on labor market readiness, drawing from a broader range of studies included in the tabular extraction. The majority of studies reported positive outcomes, but the synthesis also highlights nuanced findings and contextual factors that influence these outcomes.

## Employability

The impact of exit exams on employability is a central theme across the reviewed studies. [Ackeren et al. \(2012\)](#) found that students in Germany who passed statewide exit exams were more likely to secure employment shortly after graduation, attributing this to the exams' alignment with industry standards. Similarly, [Aristeidou et al. \(2024\)](#) reported that online exit exams in the UK were positively associated with employability, as they allowed students to demonstrate adaptability and technical proficiency—skills highly valued in the labor market. [Christina and Moorthy \(2021\)](#) echoed these findings in the Indian context, where multiple entry and exit options in degree courses were linked to improved employability due to their flexibility and relevance to industry needs.

However, not all studies reported uniformly positive outcomes. [Bracey \(2009\)](#) and [Warren and Grodsky \(2009\)](#) found that mandatory exit exams in the United States had mixed effects on employability, with some students struggling to secure jobs despite passing the exams. These disparities were often tied to misalignment between exam content and local labor market demands. [Dempster \(2012\)](#) further highlighted regional variations in Africa, where exit exams' effectiveness depended on the degree to which they addressed specific industry requirements.

## Skill Acquisition

Exit exams were frequently associated with enhanced skill acquisition, particularly when they emphasized practical and industry-relevant competencies. [Al Ahmad et al. \(2014\)](#) noted that exit exams in the UAE served as effective indicators of academic performance and skill mastery, especially in technical fields. [Bishop \(1999\)](#) and [Merki \(2011\)](#) found that exit exams in Sweden and Germany, respectively, encouraged self-regulated learning and deeper engagement with course material, leading to better skill development.

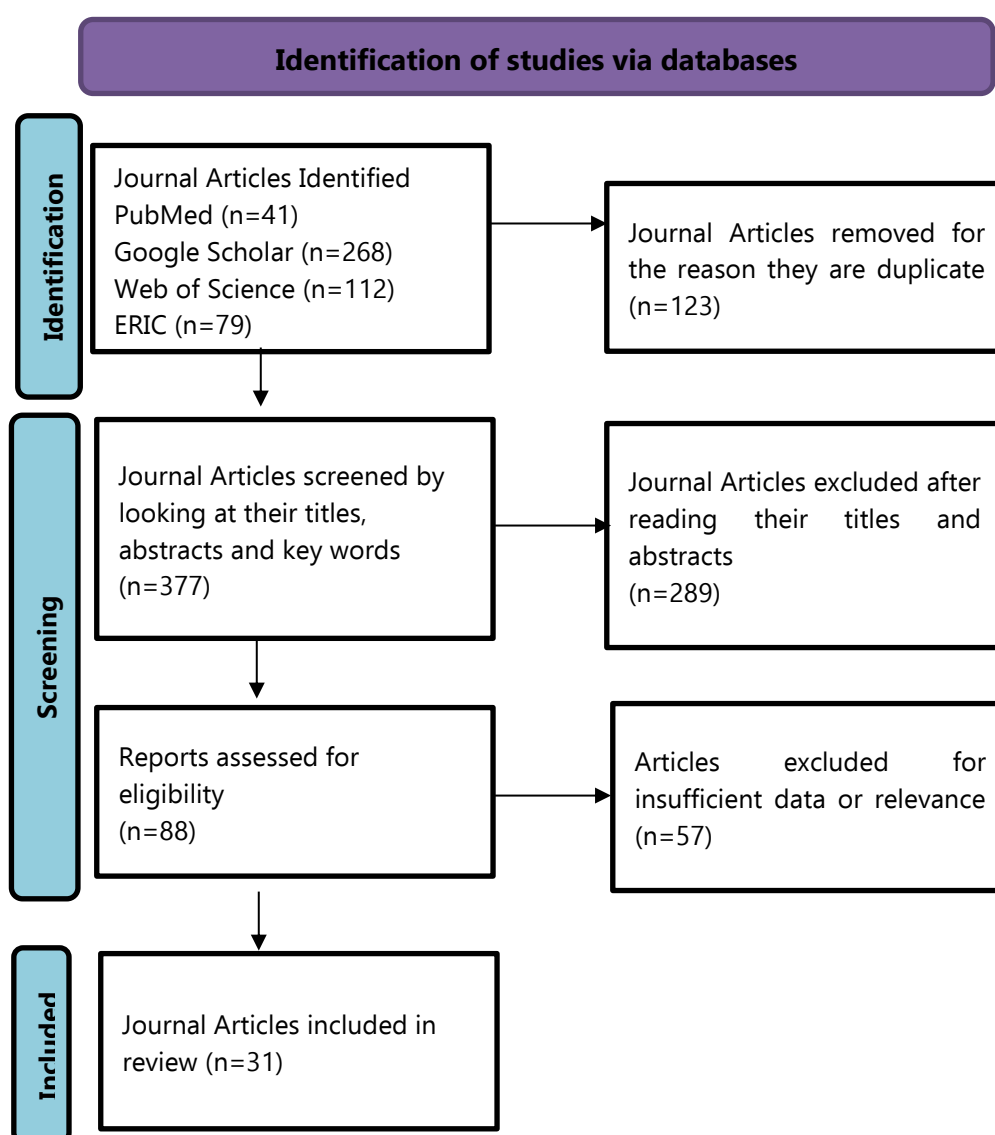
In specialized fields like nursing and pharmacy, exit exams were particularly impactful. [Rosqvist et al. \(2022\)](#) highlighted how nursing exit exams in Finland used standardized instruments to assess clinical competencies, ensuring graduates were practice-ready. Similarly, [Khan et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Siddiqui et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasized the role of pharmacy exit exams in India in elevating professional standards and ensuring graduates possessed the necessary skills for the workforce.

## Career Readiness

Career readiness emerged as a multifaceted outcome influenced by exit exams. [Aniley \(2023\)](#) and [Ayenew and Yohannes \(2022\)](#) found that exit exams in Ethiopian engineering programs enhanced career readiness by certifying graduates' technical proficiency. [Carol and Brown \(1994\)](#) and [Fanjoy \(2005\)](#) reported similar outcomes in criminal justice and aviation programs in the USA, where exit exams served as a bridge between academic training and professional practice.

However, the pressure associated with high-stakes exams could also hinder career readiness. [French \(2023\)](#) and [Leigh \(2012\)](#) noted that while exit exams motivated academic achievement, they sometimes induced stress and anxiety, which could detract from

students' confidence and preparedness for the workforce. This underscores the need for balanced exam designs that prioritize both rigor and student well-being.



**Figure 1. The PRISMA Framework**

### Contextual and Cultural Factors

The synthesis also revealed the importance of contextual and cultural factors in shaping the impact of exit exams. For instance, [Lanahan \(2023\)](#) discussed how higher education entrance and exit exams in Georgia were intertwined with political and social dynamics, affecting their perceived legitimacy and effectiveness. [Houchensen \(2023\)](#) highlighted cultural relevance in exam design, showing that African American students in the USA performed better when exams incorporated culturally responsive content.

### Alignment with Industry Needs

A recurring theme was the critical role of aligning exit exams with industry needs. [Palmer et al. \(2010\)](#) and [El-Hussan et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrated that exams incorporating real-world scenarios, such as modified essay questions in medical education or curriculum-based

assessments in civil engineering, better prepared students for professional challenges. Conversely, [Slomp et al. \(2020\)](#) cautioned that medium-stakes exams lacking industry relevance had limited impact on labor market outcomes.

### Support Systems and Resources

The level of institutional support also mediated the relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness. Studies like those by [Benner \(2023\)](#) and [Weir \(2010\)](#) emphasized the importance of supplemental resources, such as career counseling and internships, in helping students translate exam success into career opportunities. In contrast, systems with inadequate support, as noted by [Adale & Kefale \(2023\)](#) in Ethiopia, saw gaps between exam performance and employment outcomes.

The thematic synthesis underscores that while exit exams generally enhance labor market readiness, their effectiveness is contingent on factors such as industry alignment, cultural context, and institutional support. Positive outcomes are most pronounced when exams are designed to reflect real-world demands and are complemented by robust student support systems. However, challenges arise when exams are overly rigid or misaligned with labor market needs, highlighting the need for adaptive policies and practices. Future research should further explore these dynamics, particularly in underrepresented regions and disciplines, to refine the role of exit exams in bridging education and employment.

Table 1: Summary of Included Studies

Authors and Year	Objective of the Study	Methodology Used	Country	Exit Exam and Labor Market Readiness
<a href="#">Ackeren et al. (2012)</a>	To examine the impact of statewide exit exams on student outcomes	Descriptive case study	Germany	Positive impact on employability
<a href="#">Adale &amp; Kefale (2023)</a>	To review implementation challenges of exit exams in Ethiopia	Literature review	Ethiopia	Mixed impact on employability
<a href="#">Al Ahmad et al. (2014)</a>	To explore exit exams as an academic performance indicator	Quantitative survey	UAE	Positive impact on skill acquisition
<a href="#">Aniley (2023)</a>	To review exit exam strategies in engineering programs	Systematic review	Ethiopia	Positive impact on career readiness
<a href="#">Aristeidou et al. (2024)</a>	To explore online exams and student satisfaction	Mixed-methods	UK	Positive impact on employability
<a href="#">Athiworakun &amp; Adunyarittigun (2022)</a>	To investigate washback effects of exit exams	Case study	Thailand	Mixed impact on employability
<a href="#">Ayenew &amp; Yohannes (2022)</a>	To assess exit exams in Ethiopia	Qualitative study	Ethiopia	Positive impact on career readiness
<a href="#">Benner (2023)</a>	To examine the effects of exit examinations on	Quantitative study	USA USA	Positive impact on employability

	adolescents' developmental outcomes			
Bishop (1999)	To assess the importance of national exit exams for educational efficiency	Literature review	Sweden	Positive impact on skill acquisition
Bracey (2009)	To examine the impact of mandatory exit exams on graduation rates	Literature review	USA	Mixed impact on employability
Carol & Brown (1994)	To develop an exit examination in criminal justice	Case study	USA	Positive impact on career readiness
Christina and Moorthy (2021)	To explore multiple entry and exit options in degree courses	Literature review	India	Positive impact on employability
Dehury (2017)	To evaluate the role of exit exams in medical education	Literature review	India	Positive impact on skill acquisition
Dempster (2012)	To compare exit-level examinations in four African countries	Comparative study Comparative study	South Africa	Mixed impact on employability
El-Hussan (2021)	To explore student perception of curriculum-based exit exams in civil engineering	Quantitative survey	UAE	Positive impact on career readiness
Fanjoy (2005)	To evaluate exit exams for college flight programs	Case study	USA	Positive impact on career readiness
French (2023)	To review the benefits and drawbacks of high-stakes final examinations	Literature review	UK	Mixed impact on employability
Houchensen (2023)	To examine culturally relevant practitioner inquiry with African American students	Qualitative study	USA	Positive impact on employability
Khan et al. (2023)	To review pharmacy exit exams in India	Literature review	India	Positive impact on skill acquisition
Lanahan (2023)	To explore higher education exit exams in Georgia	Case study	Georgia	Positive impact on career readiness
Leigh (2012)	To examine the power of the exit slip in higher education	Qualitative study	USA	Mixed impact on employability
Merki (2011)	To examine the effects of state-wide exit exams on self-regulated learning	Quantitative study	Germany	Positive impact on skill acquisition
Palmer et al. (2010)	To explore the modified essay question in exit examinations	Case study	Australia	Positive impact on employability



Pioplunink (2013)	To examine central school exit exams and labor-market outcomes	Quantitative study	Europe	Positive impact on employability
Rosqvist et al. (2022)	To review instruments used in graduating nursing students' exit exams	Literature review	Finland	Positive impact on skill acquisition
Siddiqui, et al. (2020)	To evaluate the role of pharmacy exit exams in India	Literature review	India	Positive impact on career readiness
Slomp et al. (2020)	To examine the consequences of medium-stakes large-scale exit exams	Quantitative study	Canada	Mixed impact on employability
Teshome (2024)	To review the positive and negative effects of exit exams	Systematic review	Ethiopia	Positive impact on career readiness
Woessmann (2018)	To examine the impact of central exit exams on student outcomes	Literature review	Germany	Positive impact on skill acquisition
Warren & Grodsky (2009)	To examine the impact of exit exams on students	Quantitative study	USA	Mixed impact on employability
Weir (2010)	To explore the use of entry/exit exams as an assessment tool	Quantitative study	USA	Positive impact on employability

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review highlight the complex relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness, with implications for educational policy, practice, and future research. Drawing on the synthesized evidence, the discussion below substantiates key arguments using sources from the reviewed studies.

The review reveals that exit exams are most effective when their content aligns with labor market demands. Ackeren et al. (2012) and El-Hussan et al. (2021) demonstrated that exams incorporating real-world applications—such as case studies in civil engineering or clinical simulations in nursing—better prepare graduates for employment. Conversely, studies like Bracey (2009) and Warren & Grodsky (2009) found that misaligned exams in the U.S. led to mixed employability outcomes. Policymakers should therefore collaborate with industry stakeholders to ensure exam curricula reflect evolving workforce requirements (Palmer et al., 2010; Siddiqui et al., 2020).

High-stakes exit exams can create undue stress, potentially undermining career readiness (French, 2023; Leigh, 2012). For instance, Houchensen (2023) noted that culturally insensitive exams disproportionately disadvantaged minority students. To mitigate this, policies could adopt "medium-stakes" exam models (Slomp et al., 2020) or integrate formative assessments that reduce anxiety while maintaining standards (Merki, 2011).

Institutional support—such as internships, career counseling, and industry partnerships—amplifies the positive impact of exit exams. Benner (2023) and Weir (2010)



linked such resources to higher employability, while [Adale & Kefale \(2023\)](#) identified gaps in Ethiopian higher education where support was lacking. Policymakers should mandate career readiness programs alongside exit exams to bridge this gap.

Educators should embed experiential learning (e.g., simulations, co-op programs) into curricula to complement exit exams. [Rosqvist et al. \(2022\)](#) showed that hands-on assessments in nursing and aviation programs enhanced skill acquisition and employability. Similarly, [Christina and Moorthy \(2021\)](#) advocated for flexible "multiple exit" pathways in India to cater to diverse career trajectories.

The review underscores the need for culturally inclusive exam designs. [Lanahan \(2023\)](#) and [Houchensen \(2023\)](#) emphasized that exams must account for socio-cultural contexts to ensure equity. For example, incorporating local case studies or multilingual options could improve outcomes for marginalized students.

The rise of online exit exams ([Aristeidou et al., 2024](#)) offers opportunities to assess digital literacy—a critical labor market skill. However, educators must ensure accessibility and prevent cheating, as noted in studies on remote proctoring ([Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022](#)).

While many studies measured short-term employability (e.g., [Ackeren et al., 2012](#)), longitudinal research is needed to assess the sustained impact of exit exams on career progression ([Teshome, 2024a](#)). The review identified regional disparities (e.g., [Dempster, 2012](#) on Africa vs. [Bishop, 1999](#) on Sweden). Future studies should compare exam frameworks across cultures to identify transferable best practices. Research should explore alternatives to traditional exams, such as competency-based portfolios ([Dehury, 2017](#)) or collaborative assessments ([Leigh, 2012](#)), to reduce stress while maintaining rigor.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, exit exams play a critical role in higher education, but their impact on labor market readiness is influenced by a variety of factors. This review has highlighted the complex relationship between exit exams and labor market readiness, with findings suggesting that while these exams can enhance employability and career preparedness, their impact is not uniformly positive. The implications of these findings for educational policy and practice are clear: there is a need for a more balanced approach to exit exams that prioritizes both academic achievement and career readiness.

By addressing the challenges associated with exit exams, educators and policymakers can create a more supportive and effective educational system that prepares students for success in the labor market. This review underscores the importance of considering the role of exit exams in preparing students for the workforce and highlights the need for further research to inform the development of more effective and supportive educational systems.

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