

A Decade of Challenges and Progress: An Analysis of the Secondary School Leaving Examination in Somalia (2015–2024)

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Abstract

After the civil war in 1991, Somalia went 24 years without a unified national secondary school leaving examination due to the absence of a centralized government. The exams were reinstated in 2015, marking a significant step toward rebuilding the education system. During the absence of a government-administered certification exam, various educational associations provided recognized secondary education certificates. Notable among them were **FPENS** and **SAFE** which played a crucial role in maintaining educational standards and certification during this period.

Objective: This study aims to analyze student participation trends and success rates over the years, while also evaluating the progress and challenges faced by the National Examination between 2015 and 2024.

Methodology: In this study, utilized secondary data obtained from the Ministry of Education, and interviews were conducted with staff from the Ministry of Education, formal education networks, Director of Union of Banadir Region Schools, and the director of Somali Teachers Syndicate.

Findings: study findings show significant growth in student participation, indicating a positive shift in access to secondary education in Somalia. Student enrollment in the exam has grown from 3,522 in 2014 to 36,034 in 2024. The number of female students participating in the exams has also increased in recent years.

From 2021 to 2024, the average pass rates of students have improved across all states. In this regard, students from Jubbaland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, and Southwest have achieved pass rates reaching or exceeding 99%. Notably, the Banaadir region has the highest number of students passing the exam, with 89%.

Keywords: National Examination, Secondary Education, Student Participation, Pass Rates, Challenges in Education, Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education, Somalia

Introduction

The national exam in Somalia is an official evaluation system use to measure the academic level of students who have completed their secondary education. However, After the civil wars

in the country in 1991, there was a long period without a unified government exam. During the absence of the government certification exam, there were formal education networks that provide certificates recognized for secondary education. Among these were FPENS (Formal Private Education Network in Somalia) and SAFE (Somali Association for Formal Education). Secondary certificates from these networks were accepted to continue their higher education within the country and overseas.

Nevertheless, in 2015, the first government exam was conducted since the collapse, marking a sign of recovery for the country's formal education system. This exam is held every year in the month of June and plays an important role in assessing the quality of education and preparing students to transition to higher education. From 2015 to 2024, there has been a significant increase in the number of students sitting for the exam, reflecting the growth of education and the confidence in the national exam system.

This research focuses on the National Exam in Somalia for the academic years 2015-2024, examining the number of students attended each year, pass and fail rates, the difference between regional states.

Over the ten-year period, various challenges have emerged, prompting collaboration between the

government and education stakeholders to enhance the examination process.

Literature

There is a consensus among researchers that systemic challenges such as limited access to quality education, teacher qualifications, and economic barriers significantly hinder academic performance in Somali secondary schools (Dirie, 2024; Elmi, 2022; Osman & Omar, 2023). Dirie (2024) identifies economic constraints, insufficient infrastructure, and teacher shortages as primary determinants of poor outcomes, aligning with Elmi's (2022) findings that parental disengagement and exam-related stressors exacerbate failure rates. These factors are further compounded by instability and cultural attitudes toward education, particularly gender disparities in access (Dirie, 2024). While Dirie (2024) and Osman and Omar (2023) emphasize curriculum quality and teacher training as critical levers for improvement, Mohamed (2022) highlights administrative inefficiencies, such as exam leakage and unfair invigilation, as immediate threats to the credibility of national examinations. The shared focus on structural and institutional weaknesses underscores the multifaceted nature of educational challenges in Somalia.

A notable area of agreement lies in the role of teacher competency and professional development. Dirie (2024) stresses that only 36% of primary and 15% of secondary teachers in Somalia are qualified,

directly linking this to poor student performance. Similarly, Osman and Omar (2023) argue that teacher qualification gaps mediate low exam outcomes, while Elmi (2022) attributes student failure to inadequate pedagogical methods and lack of motivation among educators. Mohamed (2022) diverges slightly by focusing on systemic exam administration flaws rather than teacher-specific issues, though all authors concur that improving educator capacity is vital. These differences may stem from methodological variations: Dirie (2024) and Osman and Omar (2023) employ quantitative and structural equation models, respectively, whereas Mohamed (2022) relies on stakeholder surveys, prioritizing immediate logistical concerns over long-term pedagogical reforms.

Disagreements emerge regarding the primacy of curriculum quality versus exam integrity. Dirie (2024) positions curriculum relevance and extracurricular opportunities as pivotal for engagement, whereas Mohamed (2022) identifies leaked exams and politicized invigilation as more urgent barriers. Elmi (2022) and Osman and Omar (2023) bridge this divide by acknowledging both classroom-level factors (e.g., parental involvement) and systemic issues (e.g., governance). These discrepancies likely reflect differing research scopes: Dirie (2024) and Osman and Omar (2023) analyze academic performance broadly, while Mohamed (2022) targets examination-specific vulnerabilities. For instance, Mohamed (2022)

notes that 51% of stakeholders fear exam leaks, a concern less emphasized in studies focused on classroom dynamics.

The implications for this research are twofold. First, the consensus on teacher training and economic barriers necessitates highlighting Somalia's progress in reclaiming schools and standardizing curricula, as noted in this research. Second, the disputes between curriculum-focused and exam-focused studies suggest the need to address both pedagogical quality and administrative reforms. For example, while our research documents rising participation rates (3,522 students in 2015 to 36,034 in 2024), Mohamed's (2022) findings on regional inequities in monitoring (e.g., stricter oversight in Banadir) contextualize why certain regions, despite higher participation, report disproportionate failure rates. Synthesizing these perspectives will provide a holistic view of Somalia's examination system, balancing infrastructural advancements with unresolved systemic flaws.

Methodology

In this study, utilized secondary data obtained from the Ministry of Education and interviews were conducted with staff from the Ministry of Education, leaders of education networks, director of Banadir Region Schools, and director of Somali Teachers Syndicate.

Data collection were focused on the challenges and solutions encountered over the ten years of the national certification exam, from the academic year 2014/2015 to 2013/2024.

The collected data were analyzed using Time Series Analysis to examine the trends and progress made in recent years. The data presented in this study will not include Puntland and Somaliland, as they are not part of the federal government's certification exam system. Additionally, SSC-Khaatumo will not be represented in the data from the academic years 15 to 2022/23 due to its affiliation with Somaliland during that period.

Results

This section analyzes the results of the national exam for the academic years 2014-2024, focusing on student success rates, comparisons between the number of boys and girls, and results from various regions. It will also examine the challenges faced by the exam during this period, reflecting on aspects of administration, student participation, and the impact of various circumstances related to the exam.

1. Academic Year 2014-2015

This year 2015 was the first time in more than two decades sat for the national exam, it marked the recovery of formal education in Somalia. A total of 3,522 students from across the country participated in the exam, representing a significant step toward ensuring that students receive an officially

recognized certificate from the government. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with the education networks made a significant effort to administer the exam fairly by implementing a secure exam system. As the figure 1 shows, number of students who sat the exam was very small compared to following year.

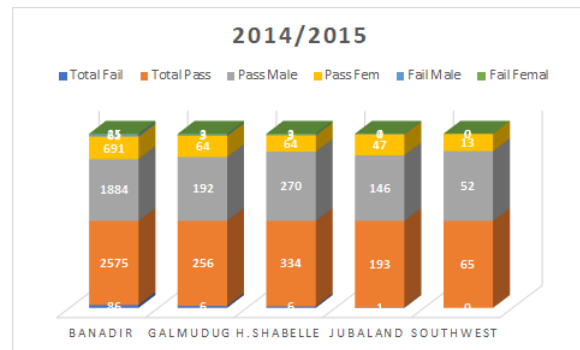


Figure 1: 2015 Exam Results

In the 2014-2015 exam, 3,522 students sat for the exam. Overall, 3,423 students passed (97.19%), while 99 students failed (2.81%). The majority of the candidates were boys, with 2,612 (74.17%) participating, of whom 2,544 (97.40%) passed, while 68 (2.60%) failed. On the other hand, 910 girls (25.83%) sat for the exam, with 879 (96.59%) passed and 31 (3.41%) failed.

As the first national exam after more than two decades, students from various states including Banaadir participated, of these 2,575 (96.7%) passed, while 86 (3.3%) failed. In Galmudug, 262 students (7.4%) participated, with 256 (97.7%) passed and 6 students failed (2.3%). In Hirshabelle, 340 students (9.6%) sat the exam, with 334 (98.2%) passed and 6 failed (1.8%). Jubbaland had 194 students (5.5%), with 193 (99.5%) passed, and only 1 student failed. In South West, 65 students (1.8%)

participated, all of whom passed, with no failures reported.

2. Academic Year 2015-2016

The 2015–2016 academic year marked the second consecutive national exam, with a total of 11,573 students sitting for the exam. As shown in Figure 2.

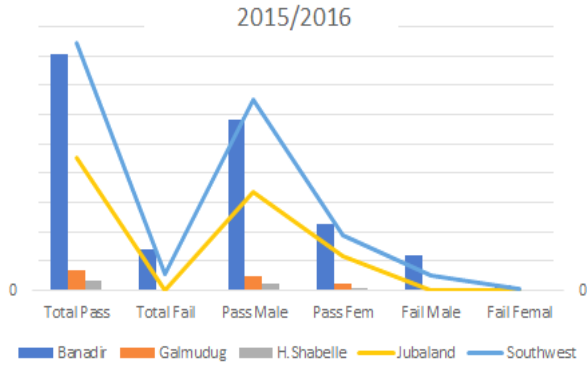


Figure 2: 2016 Exam Results

Overall, 10,104 students passed (87.32%), while 1,469 students failed (12.68%). The majority of candidates were boys, with 8,543 (73.84%) participating; of these, 7,285 (85.31%) passed, while 1,258 (14.73%) failed. Conversely, 3,030 girls (26.16%) sat the exam, with 2,819 (93.04%) passed and 211 (6.96%) failed. According to the regional states and Banadir. In Banaadir had 9,498 students (82%), with 8,082 (85%) passed and 1,416 (15%) failed. Galmudug, 702 students (6%) sat for the exam, with 696 (99%) passed, while 6 students (1%) failed. In Hirshabelle, 322 students (2.9%) participated, with 396 (99%) passed and 3 students (1%) failed. Jubaland had 352 students (3%), all of whom passed (100%). In South West, 699 students (6%) participated, with 655 (94%) passed and 44

students (6%) failed. The participation rate in South West increased to nearly 700 students from the previous year's 65 students (1%), while Banaadir also saw a 6% increase compared to 2015.

3. Academic Year 2016-2017

There was continuity growth of national exam participation as shown in figure 3 for the academic year 2016-2017, participated a total of 18,239 students.

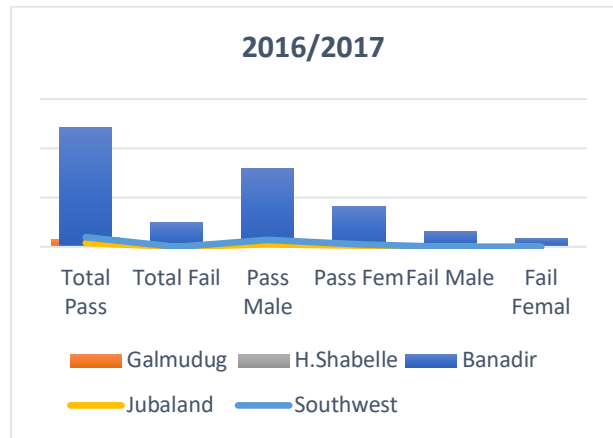


Figure 3: 2017 Exam Results

Overall, 15,356 students passed (84.19%), while 2,883 students failed (15.81%). The majority of candidates were boys, with 12,062 (66.15%) sat for the exam; of these, 10,261 (85.06%) passed, while 1,801 (14.94%) failed. On the other hand, 6,177 girls (33.85%) participated, with 5,095 (82.50%) passed 1,082 (17.50%) failed.

According to the states, In Galmudug, 812 students (4.5%) participated, with 810 (99.7%) passed and 2 (0.03%) failed. Hirshabelle had 1,419 students (7.8%) participated, with 1,059 (75%) passed and

360 (25%) failed. Jubbaland had 386 students (2.1%), and all of them passed (100%). In South West, 981 students (5.4%) participated, with 972 (99%) passed and 9 (1%) failed. Banaadir accounted for 14,614 students (80%), with 12,129 (83%) passing and 2,512 (17%) failing.

This data shows that Jubbaland maintained a 100% pass rate for its students over two years, while Hirshabelle's 25% failure rate is the highest among all regions and Banadir

4. Academic Year 2017-2018

In the 2017-2018 academic year, a total of 25,675 students participated in the examination. Overall, the number of students who passed the exam was 20,023 (77.99%), while those who failed amounted to 5,652 (22.01%). As indicated Figure 4 the majority of the candidates were boys, with 16,550 boys (64.46%) taking the exam; of these, 12,973 (78.39%) passed, while 3,577 (21.61%) failed. Conversely, 9,125 girls (35.54%) sat for the exam, with 7,050 (77.25%) passed and 2,075 (22.75%) failed.

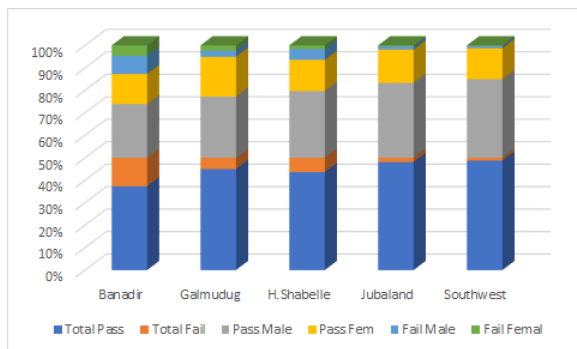


Figure 4: 2018 Exam Results

Conversely, 9,125 girls (35.54%) sat for the exam, with 7,050 (77.25%) passed and 2,075 (22.75%) failed. Although Banaadir, 20,615 students (80%) passed, while 15,372 (74.5%) failed, totaling 5,243 (25.5%). Hirshabelle had 1,791 students (7%) participated, of which 1,562 (87%) passed, while 229 (13%) failed. Jubbaland had 636 students (2.5%), with 612 (96%) passed and 24 (4%) failed. Galmudug had 1,178 students (4.6%) participated, with a total of 1,059 (90%) passed and 19 (10%) failed. South West had 1,455 students (5.6%), with 1,418 (97%) passed and 37 (3%) failed.

The Banaadir region has recorded the lowest pass rate over the past three years at 74.5%.

5. Academic Year 2018-2019

In the 2018-2019 academic year, according to Figure 5, a total of 29,434 students participated in the national exam.

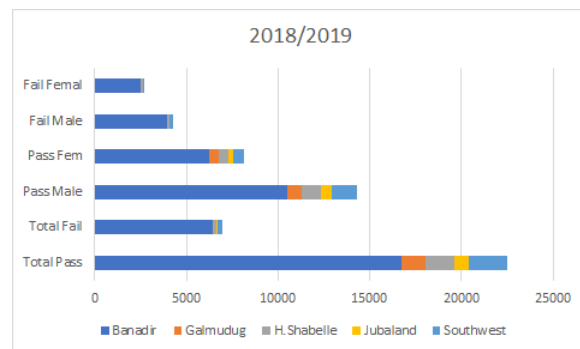


Figure 5: 2019 Exam Results

Overall, 22,499 students passed (76.45%), while 6,935 students failed (23.55%). The majority of candidates were boys, with 18,582 boys (63.14%) sat the exam; of these, 14,335 (77.14%) passed,

while 4,247 (22.86%) failed. Conversely, 10,852 girls (36.86%) participated, with 8,164 (75.25%) passed and 2,688 (24.75%) failed.

On the other hand In Banadir, 16,718 students (72%) participated, with a failure rate of 28%. The total number of candidates was 23,160 (78.7%). In Galmudug, 1,291 students (93%) passed, with 15 students (7%) failing from a total of 1,306 (4.4%) participants. Hirshabelle saw 1,617 students (89%) passed, while 204 students (11%) failed, out of 1,821 (6%) participants. Jubbaland had 802 students (99%) pass, with 5 students (1%) failed from a total of 807 (2.7%) participants. In South West, 2,071 students (86%) passed, while 269 students (14%) failed, from a total of 23,160 (78.7%) participants

6. Academic Year 2019-2020

In the academic year 2019-2020, students participated in the national exam was 33,727. As indicated Figure 6, Overall, 25,177 students passed (74.67%), while 8,550 students failed (25.33%).

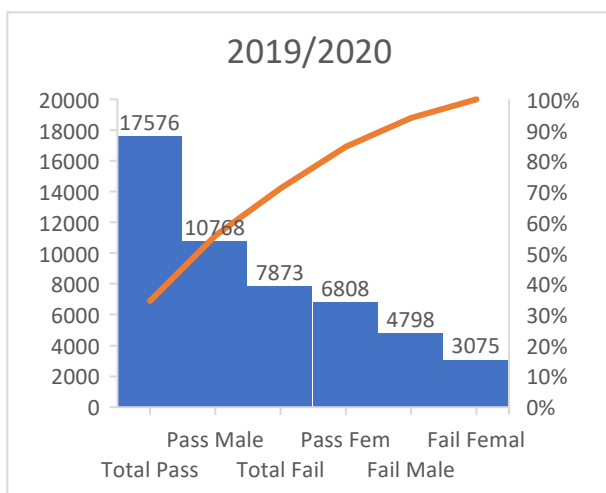


Figure 6: 2020 Exam Results

The majority of candidates were boys, with 21,006 boys (62.30%) sat the exam; of these, 15,776 (75.12%) passed, while 5,230 (24.88%) failed. Conversely, 12,721 girls (37.70%) participated, with 9,401 (73.90%) passing and 3,320 (26.10%) failing.

Regional participation and results also showed significant differences In Banadir, 7,873 students (31%) failed, while 17,576 students (69%) passed, with a total of 25,449 (75.4%) candidates. In Galmudug, 1,987 students (98%) passed, while 33 students (2%) failed from a total of 2,020 (6%) participants. In Hirshabelle, 1,741 students (91%) passed, while 163 students (9%) failed from a total of 1,904 (5.6%) participants. Jubbaland saw 987 students (99%) pass, with 4 students (1%) failed from a total of 911 (3%) participants. In South West, 2,886 students (86%) passed, while 477 students (14%) failed from a total of 2,020 (6%) participants.

This data indicates that, over the ten years of conducting the exam, the year 2020 marked the highest failure rate in Banadir at 31%.

7. Academic Year 2020-2021

In the academic year 2020-2021, a total of 34,908 students sat for the examination. According to the Figure 7, overall, 30,262 students (86.72%) passed, while 4,646 students (13.28%) failed. The exam had a higher number of boys, with 21,466 boys (61.51%) participated, of whom 18,702 (87.13%) passed, while 2,764 (12.87%) failed. On the other

hand, 13,442 girls (38.49%) sat the exam, with 11,560 (86.06%) passed and 1,882 (13.94%) failed.

sat for the exam, with 12,842 (95.92%) passed and 545 (4.08%) failed.

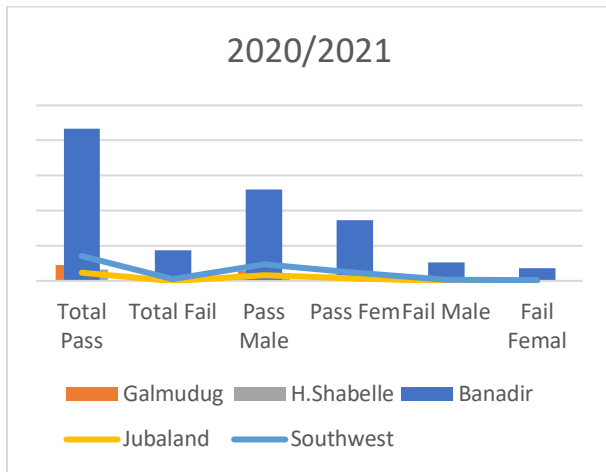


Figure 7: 2021 Exam Results

Therefore, In Galmudug, 2,302 students participated, of whom 2,300 (99%) passed and 2 (1%) failed. In Hirshabelle, 1,627 students took the exam, with 1,619 (99.5%) passed and 8 (0.5%) failed. Jubaland had 1,158 students participated, of which 1,155 (99.7%) passed and 3 (0.3%) failed. In South West, 3,779 students participated, with 3,534 (93%) passed and 245 (7%) failed. Banaadir had 26,042 students, where 21,654 (83%) passed and 4,388 (17%) failed.

In addition, Galmudug, 2,333 students participated, of whom 2,327 (99.7%) passed and 7 (0.3%) failed. Hirshabelle had 2,081 students, with 2,075 (99.7%) passed and 6 (0.3%) failed. In Jubaland, 1,334 students participated, of which 1,328 (99.5%) passed and 6 (0.5%) failed. South West had 4,018 students, with 3,995 (99%) passed and 23 (1%) failed. Banaadir had 23,702 students, of whom 22,602 (95%) passed and 1,100 (5%) failed. The number of students in Banaadir decreased by 3,000, with a success rate of over 95%.

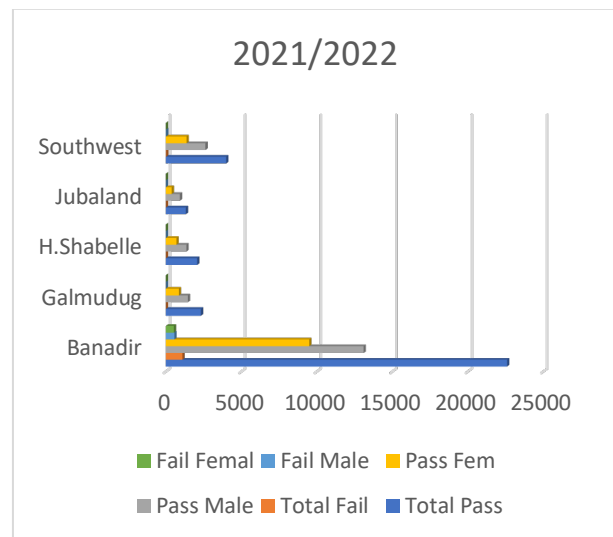


Figure 8: 2022 Exam Results

8. Academic Year 2021-2022

In the academic year 2021-2022, as shown in figure 8, a total of 33,468 students sat for the examination. Overall, 32,326 students (96.59%) passed, while 1,142 (3.41%) failed. The exam was predominantly taken by boys, with 20,081 boys (60.02%) participated; 19,484 (97.02%) passed and 597 (2.98%) failed. Meanwhile, 13,387 girls (39.98%)

9. Academic Year 2022-2023

In the academic year 2022-2023, a total of 32,501 students sat for the examination. According to Figure 9, overall, 30,018 students (92.36%) passed, while 2,483 students (7.64%) failed. The exam was predominantly taken by boys, with 19,322 boys

(59.45%) participated; 17,843 (92.35%) passed, and 1,479 (7.65%) failed. Meanwhile, 13,179 girls (40.55%) sat the exam, with 12,175 (92.38%) passed and 1,004 (7.62%) failed.

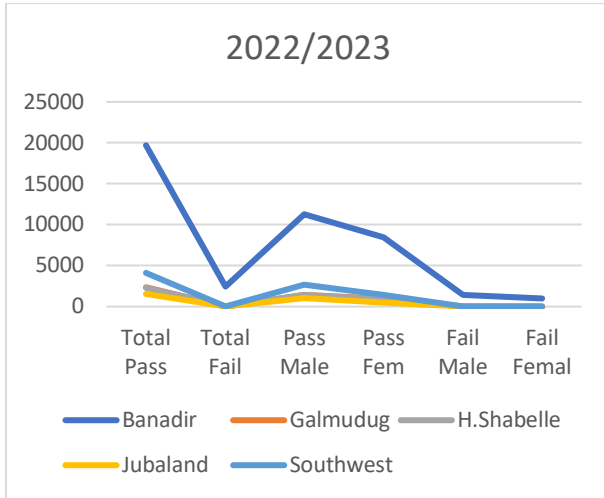


Figure 9: 2023 Exam Results

The participation and results varied across the regions in South West, 4,128 students (12.7%) participated, with 4,115 (99.6%) passing and 13 (0.3%) failed. Galmudug had 2,373 students (7.4%), of whom 2,361 (99%) passed and 12 (1%) failed. Hirshabeelle had 2,299 students (7%), with 2,294 (99.7%) passed and 5 (0.3%) failed. Jubaland had 1,550 students (4.8%), where 1,545 (99.6%) passed and 5 (0.4%) failed. In Banaadir, 22,151 students (68.1%) participated, with 19,703 (89%) passed and 2,448 (11%) failed. This year in Jubaland, five students failed the exam, all of whom were boys, and there were no girls who failed. In the ten years the examination has been conducted, for seven of those years, there have been no girls who failed in Jubaland. Additionally, only seven girls failed the

exam during the entire duration of the examination in Jubaland.

10. Academic Year 2023-2024

In the academic year 2023-2024, a total of 36,034 students from various regions of the country and the Banadir region sat for the examination. Overall, 33,666 students (93.42%) passed, while 2,366 (6.58%) failed. The number of boys who participated in the exam was 19,322 (53.62%), with 17,843 (92.34%) passing and 1,479 (7.66%) failing. Meanwhile, 16,712 girls (46.38%) took the exam, with 12,175 (92.38%) passing and 1,004 (7.62%) failing.

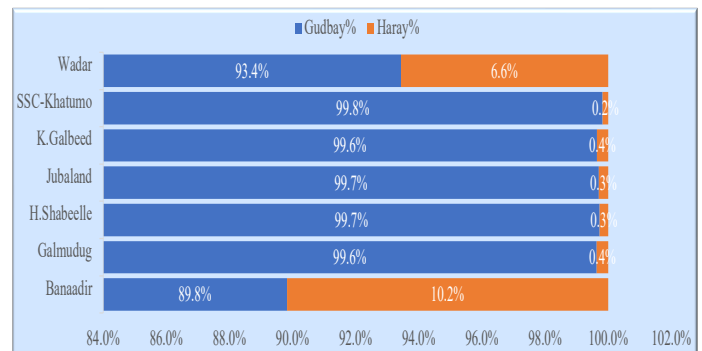


Figure 10: 2024 Exam Results

Regional participation and results also showed significant differences in South West, 4,989 students participated, with 4,971 (99.6%) passed and 18 (0.4%) failed. Galmudug had 2,472 students, of whom 2,463 (99.6%) passed and 9 (0.4%) failed. Jubaland had 2,030 students, with 2,025 (99.7%) passed and 6 (0.3%) failed. Hirshabeelle had 2,579 students, with 2,527 (99.7%) passed and 7 (0.3%) failed. SSC-Khatumo had 1,133 students, of whom 1,131 (99.8%) passed and 2 (0.2%) failed. Banaadir

had 22,831 students, with 20,507 (89.8%) passed and 2,324 (10.2%) failed.

Challenges of the National Examination in the Last 10 Years

1. in 2015 there was a security issues such as:-
 - A. Threats from Al-Shabaab.
 - B. A suicide bomb attack targeted the Ministry of Education just days before the exam.
 - C. supervisors and ministry personnel were afraid to visit exam centers.
 - D. Students feared sitting for the exam due to threats from Al-shabab. According to Al-shabab *“any student sits for the exam was equivalent to a soldier on the battlefield.”*
 - E. The military, police, intelligence agency (NISA), and prison guards were each assigned specific zones to prevent attacks on exam centers.
 - F. There were continuous threatening messages, including warnings about explosives being planted in exam centers.
2. Educational umbrella networks opposed government exam due to a conflict of interest, such as losing control over exam administration and the fees they collected from students.
3. The government insisted on a unified national exam for the 2014/2015 academic year, despite resistance from umbrella organizations that refused to submit student lists to the ministry.
4. At the beginning of the 2015 exam, some school administrators and umbrella organizations did not submit the full list of students eligible for the national exam, which resulted in only 3,522 students participating and the Ministry of Education did not have control over public schools.
5. Government-issued certificates became less trusted than those from umbrella education networks, especially between 2015 and 2016.
6. Between 2015 and 2018, the Ministry of Education lacked a comprehensive database of secondary school students. The only information available and shared with the ministry was the list of students sitting for the national exam each year.
7. There was no standardized curriculum for exams, but there was an agreement on specific chapters to be included in the exam from 2015 to 2019. For the past ten years, 90% of the exam questions were based on the 12th-grade syllabus.
8. There’s no teacher guide book for secondary curriculum
9. At the beginning of the 2015 exam, it was printed abroad, specifically in Kenya.
10. Between 2015 and 2019, students had to take two separate exams that were not standardized, leading to discrepancies in scores between the government exam and the umbrella organization exams.

11. Between 2015 and 2022, different fees were imposed on students for exams and certificates by both the Ministry of Education networks
12. According to the ministry of education there's a widespread myth among states that monitoring in some regions was weak due to favoritism. It is believed that some exam supervisors allegedly assisted students from their own regions, thinking they should score higher than students from other regions.
13. In 2020, Arabic curriculum exams were discontinued after a unified national high school curriculum was introduced, creating challenges for students who had studied under the Arabic system.
14. According to an argument from the Union of Banadir region Schools in 2022 students were shifting from Banadir to other regions to sit the exam due to stricter monitoring in Banadir compared to other areas.
15. Cheating was a major issue throughout the exam period, with 2019 being the worst year, when leaked exam answers forced authorities to reschedule the exam.
16. Between 2015 and 2016, the Ministry of Education lacked the necessary facilities for printing, storing, grading, and securing exam papers.
17. Financial constraints affected the smooth administration of the national exams.

Progress in the National Examination Over the Past 10 Years

- A. The Ministry of Education has maintained the regular administration of the National Examination.
- B. Concerns about exam security have been completely eliminated.
- C. The government-issued certificate is now fully trusted.
- D. The two separate exams previously taken by students were discontinued in 2020 by order of the Minister of Education.
- E. The issuance of certificates by educational umbrella organizations has been abolished.
- F. A unified curriculum has been developed and implemented across all schools in the country.
- G. The fees that students previously paid for exams and certificates have been removed.
- H. The Ministry of Education has integrated student data into the Education Management Information System (EMIS), making it easier to track high school student records.
- I. Teachers have undergone training programs to improve the quality of education.
- J. The grading criteria for exams have been revised.
- K. The Ministry has established facilities for printing, storing, and grading exams.
- L. Each district now has government-appointed teachers under the Ministry of Education.

- M. The Ministry of Education has reclaimed nearly 70 public schools across the country.
- N. Strict measures have been implemented to prevent exam leaks before the exams take place.
- O. Exam quality has improved and is designed to align with East Africa standards

Conclusion

The National Examination of Somalia, reintroduced in 2015, has become a crucial tool for assessing the knowledge of secondary school students. Despite the challenges faced by the country, including the collapse of governance and difficult security conditions, this examination system has significantly succeeded in unifying the education system, ensuring the quality of education, and preparing students for higher education.

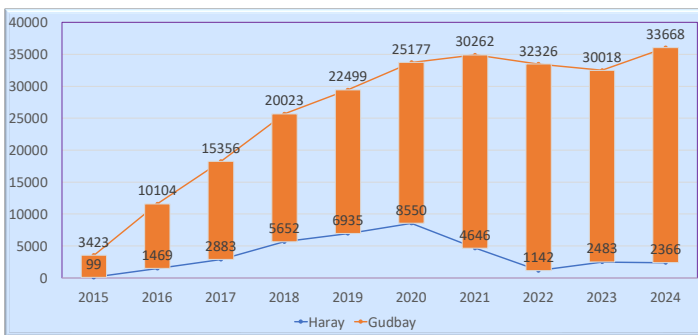


Figure 11: 2015-2024 Exam Results

Over the past ten years (2015-2024), as shown in Figure 11, the number of students sitting for the examination has steadily increased. In 2015, 3,522 students participated in the examination, while in 2024, that number rose to 36,034, reflecting an

increase of over 80%. This growth indicates the rising demand for education and the community's confidence in the government's education system. Furthermore, Data from the examinations conducted in recent years shows that the pass rate among students has improved.

Recommendation

Recommendations for Strengthening the National Examination System in Somalia: -

1. Introduce Digital Examination and Grading Systems to reduce exam leaks and human errors in grading, Somalia should explore computer-based testing (CBT) for secondary school exams.
2. Strengthen Anti-Cheating Measures and Accountability Despite existing improvements, cheating remains a concern. Implementing strict penalties for malpractice, anonymous reporting systems, and deploying independent external monitors during exams.
3. Diversify and Modernize Exam Question Formats The current exam system heavily relies on the 12th-grade syllabus and traditional formats. Introducing case studies, analytical essays, and project-based assessments will better prepare students for higher education and the job market. Assessments should reflect real-world problem-solving skills rather than just memorization.

4. Implement a Continuous Assessment System to reduce the pressure of a single final exam determining a student's academic future, the system should introduce continuous assessment. This approach blends coursework, projects, and termly tests into the final score, ensuring a more comprehensive evaluation of students' capabilities.
5. Improve Funding and Sustainability of the Exam System Although exam fees have been eliminated, the government should diversify funding sources beyond donors to ensure financial sustainability. Creating public-private partnerships and education development funds can help support exam administration, curriculum development, and teacher training.

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