



Standard-Setting or Gatekeeping? A Historical Document Analysis of the Philippine National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) and Its Exclusionary Effects, 1973–1994

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Abstract

The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) was mandated by President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. in 1973 through Presidential Decree No. 146 as a prerequisite for four-year degree enrollment. However, it was abolished by Republic Act No. 7731 in 1994. Despite documented complaints and performance disparities during its operation, no study had traced its complete policy lifecycle using official records. This study examines whether, how, and under what conditions the NCEE functioned as a standard-setting or exclusionary gatekeeping mechanism, through qualitative document analysis of several primary sources supplemented by contemporaneous published studies. Findings show the NCEE operated as an adjustable standard, with cut-offs varying by field and declining over time. Yet legislative records reveal stark pass-rate differentials by school type (roughly 60% private sectarian, 50% national, 30% barangay), compounded by retake limits and vocational tracking of non-passers. This disproportionately burdened disadvantaged students. Rather than proving deliberate discrimination, the study demonstrates how a centralized exam implemented over an inequitable education system produced exclusionary effects severe enough to prompt abolition instead of reform. This study also informs the current debates on centralized assessment.

Keywords: *Philippine Higher Education, Education Policy, National College Entrance Examination, Educational Inequality, Academic Freedom, Centralized Examination, Qualitative Document Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

In 1973, the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. promulgated Presidential Decree No. 146, which mandated that aspiring college students pass a National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) before entering any four-year degree program (Arellano Law Foundation, n.d.-a). The decree framed the examination as a quality-assurance measure: it declared that the state had to preserve educational quality and to achieve this, the law provided for a single entrance examination for all students (Arellano Law Foundation, n.d.-a). Letter of Instruction No. 783 expanded this requirement to foreign students seeking student visas (Chan Robles Law Firm, n.d.), while Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECS) Order No. 9 exempted war veterans, rebel returnees, students who had taken college courses before 1973, members of the military, and some students with disabilities (Corpuz, 1984). In its early years, a student had to reach at least the 30th percentile to pass (Danskin, 1979), a threshold the education ministry repeatedly adjusted over the following years. The requirement stood for twenty years until Republic Act No. 7731 abolished the examination in 1994 (Arellano Law Foundation, n.d.-b), amid charges of excluding disadvantaged students and interfering with higher education's academic freedom.

Contemporaneous scholarship on the NCEE was divided. Perlman (1978) recorded educators' complaints that imposing the examination before improving the school system would

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restrict access to tertiary education and observed that rural poverty disadvantaged provincial students. Valisno (1977), then NCEE Director, defended the policy, noting that 249,000 of the first 332,000 examinees qualified for college and arguing that the examination solved the admissions problem. Costello and Palabrica-Costello (1981) found that seniors in private sectarian schools in Cebu City outscored public school students and that family background correlated with performance. Tan (1977) argued that the examination could not, by itself, solve graduate unemployment, while Cardozier (1984) interpreted the NCEE as a deliberate check on the oversupply of college graduates. These studies, however, were written while the policy was still in force; they could observe the examination's early implementation but not its full trajectory and the changes that would lead to the eventual abolition.

Because the central dispute over the NCEE turns on contested words, this study defines them operationally. Qualified refers to a student's meeting the officially set NCEE percentile cut-off for admission to a degree program; the term describes a policy classification, not a validated measure of a student's actual capacity to complete college. Gatekeeping refers to any mechanism that controls entry into higher education by admitting some applicants and excluding others; gatekeeping is legitimate for systems must maintain standards. Therefore, the analytical question is whether the gate operated on defensible, construct-relevant grounds or on grounds correlated with students' circumstances rather than their abilities. Discriminatory, as used here, describes exclusionary effects that fall systematically on identifiable groups (for example, students at barangay high schools or rural areas) regardless of whether exclusion was intended; the term is used in this disparate-effect sense, and the study makes no claim about the intentions of the policymakers.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine, through the official documentary record, how the NCEE operated as an admissions policy and why it was ultimately abolished. Rather than assuming at the outset that the examination functioned as an exclusionary gate, the study poses questions that allow the evidence to show whether, how, and under what conditions this occurred. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research question: How and to what extent did the National College Entrance Examination function as a standard-setting mechanism, an exclusionary gatekeeping mechanism, or both, based on the documentary record from 1973 to 1994?

To answer this question, the following secondary research questions were considered:

1. RQ1. How were the NCEE's passing standards set, justified, and adjusted over time, and what do these adjustments reveal about the examination's standard-setting function?
2. RQ2. What does the documentary record indicate about the relationship between students' school type, location, and socioeconomic background and their NCEE performance?
3. RQ3. How did specific implementation rules—retake restrictions, duplication with institutional entrance tests, and the vocational tracking of non-passers—shape the opportunities available to students?
4. RQ4. What arguments and evidence did policymakers advance between 1986 and 1994, and why did they ultimately choose abolition over reform?

The objective (to examine the NCEE's operation and abolition through documents), the research questions (which ask whether and how standard-setting and exclusion occurred), the historical background (a twenty-year national policy with a complete, archived record), and the research gap (the absence of a systematic document-based account of that record) are aligned. Each

question corresponds to a documented phase or feature of the policy, and the method described below is designed to answer them from that record. The study's contribution is a fully documented account of a completed national examination policy cycle that specifies which claims about the NCEE are supported by official data, which rests on legislators' assertions, and what the distinction implies for current debates on centralized assessment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature relevant to this study is organized into six themes: (1) standardized examinations and merit; (2) educational inequality and rural or socioeconomic disadvantage; (3) high-stakes testing, washback, and test fairness; (4) academic freedom and centralized examination; (5) vocational tracking and its stigma; and (6) examination reform, including the relevance and limits of the Chinese comparison. A conceptual framework then integrates these themes into the analytical lens used in this study.

Standardized Examinations and Merit

The classic justification for standardized entrance examinations is meritocratic: because every candidate faces the same instrument under the same conditions, selection is said to rest on demonstrated ability rather than on wealth, connections, or institutional favoritism. [Ruoling \(2010\)](#), analyzing the restored Chinese college entrance examination (gaokao), argues that such examinations are socially rational precisely because they open opportunity to all takers while protecting educational standards by screening out the unprepared. [Valisno \(1977\)](#), then Director of the NCEE, advanced the Philippine version of this argument: before the NCEE, college admission was largely open, and a common examination was needed to ensure that entering freshmen could handle tertiary work. [Zwick \(2002\)](#), however, shows in the context of admissions testing in the United States that the meritocratic promise of standardized tests is conditional; scores reflect not only ability but also the quality of prior schooling and preparation, so a common instrument can produce a common standard without producing a common opportunity. A direct comparison is possible for the American and Filipino educational systems because the Filipino educational system as it exists today was based on the American system ([Valleser & Casiro, 2025](#)).

Educational Inequality and Rural or Socioeconomic Disadvantage

A second body of work documents how examination performance tracks students' circumstances. In the Philippine context, [Perlman \(1978\)](#) recorded educators' warnings that rural poverty would depress provincial students' performance on the NCEE, and [Costello and Palabrica-Costello \(1981\)](#) provided empirical support: in Cebu City, students in private sectarian high schools obtained higher NCEE scores than public school students, and family background affected performance. [Manalang \(1977\)](#) added that examination failures would swell the ranks of unemployed high school graduates, and the [International Labour Organization \(1975\)](#) advised the Marcos Sr. administration that investment in basic education and student aid should complement standardized admissions. [Abejuela et al. \(2025\)](#), studying non-readers in one Calamba school division through grounded theory, show that weak family and system support still prevents Filipino children from acquiring foundational literacy—a present-day analogue of the preparation gaps that shaped NCEE outcomes. This theme connects to the sociological literature on social reproduction: [Bourdieu and Passeron \(1990\)](#) argue that ostensibly neutral educational selection mechanisms tend to reward the cultural capital that advantaged families transmit, so that schooling reproduces existing social hierarchies while appearing to certify individual merit.

High-Stakes Testing, Washback, and Test Fairness

A third theme concerns what happens when a single test carries decisive consequences. [Madaus \(1988\)](#) describes how high-stakes tests come to dominate the curriculum, as teachers teach to the test and the measured proxy displaces the underlying goal; [Au \(2009\)](#) extends this critique, arguing that high-stakes standardized testing standardizes inequality by narrowing instruction most severely in under-resourced schools. [Heubert and Hauser \(1999\)](#), synthesizing the U.S. National Research Council's review, conclude that a high-stakes decision about a student should not rest on a single test score, especially where students have not had an adequate opportunity to learn the tested material. On the measurement side, [Kane \(2013\)](#) frames validity as an argument about the interpretations and uses of scores rather than a property of the instrument itself, and the joint testing standards ([American Educational Research Association et al., 2014](#)) require evidence of fairness—including comparable opportunity to learn—before scores are used for consequential decisions. These works supply the criteria against which the NCEE's use can be assessed: the question is not merely whether the examination measured something, but whether the use of a single score to bar college entry was defensible given unequal schooling.

Academic Freedom and Centralized Examination

Philippine constitutional doctrine treats the admission policies of universities as part of their academic freedom. A mandatory national examination interacts directly with this freedom: it substitutes, or at least adds, a state-set criterion to each institution's own admission judgment. This tension surfaced in the 1986 Constitutional Commission deliberations on the education provisions ([Supreme Court of the Philippines, n.d.-a](#)) and was later crystallized in the Supreme Court's 2021 decision striking down the mandatory Philippine Law School Admission Test as an encroachment on law schools' academic freedom ([Supreme Court of the Philippines, n.d.-b](#)). The academic-freedom theme therefore provides both a contemporaneous criticism of the NCEE and the doctrinal reason a revived NCEE would likely be unconstitutional today.

Vocational Tracking and Stigma

Selection systems that route examination failers into a designated alternative tend to stigmatize that alternative. In the NCEE regime, students who did not reach the cut-off were channeled toward technical and vocational education, which—as the abolition debates recorded—converted a legitimate educational pathway into a perceived dumping ground ([House of Representatives, 1992](#); [Roco, 1994](#)). The tracking literature within social reproduction theory ([Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990](#)) predicts exactly this dynamic: when placement in a track is determined by an examination whose results correlate with social origin, the track inherits the status of the students assigned to it. Post-abolition developments are consistent with the stigma being contingent rather than intrinsic: by the 2020s, majority of enrollees in technical-vocational courses were college graduates acquiring additional skills ([Chi, 2023](#)).

Examination Reform and the Limits of the Chinese Comparison

The largest comparative literature on centralized entrance examinations concerns China's gaokao, restored in 1977—almost contemporaneously with the NCEE's introduction. [Liu \(2013\)](#) analyzes reform options for the gaokao, including regionalization, intended to preserve fairness across unequal provinces; [Wang \(2013\)](#) examines how subject design attempted to balance regional relevance with national standardization; and [Wang and Ross \(2010\)](#) show, through a case study of a high-performing rural county, that a standardized examination can function as a channel of upward mobility for poor students. These studies are relevant to the NCEE for three reasons: both examinations were centralized, state-mandated instruments introduced in the mid-1970s;

both faced the same structural criticism that a uniform test applied to unequal schools transmits inequality; and both generated reform debates about regional adjustment and fairness.

The comparison, however, has clear limits that must be stated. First, the education systems differ: China's gaokao determines *placement* which determined student program and university whereas the NCEE was a *threshold* test that determined only whether a student could enter college. Colleges and universities still had their own examinations. Second, the admission structures differ: Chinese universities exclusively use the *gaokao* while Philippine higher education is dominated by private institutions with autonomous admissions, which is why duplication and academic freedom became central objections to the NCEE but not to the gaokao. Third, regional policies differ: China manages inequality through provincial quotas and differentiated cut-offs, an instrument the Philippine system never adopted. Fourth, the political contexts differ: the gaokao operates in a one-party state where abolition is not feasible whereas the NCEE was abolished by a democratic legislature. The Chinese literature is therefore used here to illuminate the general logic and dilemmas of centralized examinations: opportunity versus standardization, uniformity versus regional inequity, not to equate the two systems, and no finding in this study depends on treating the gaokao and the NCEE as institutionally equivalent.

Finally, one Philippine study on accreditation is included because the NCEE also functioned as a de facto benchmarking device for schools. [Montano et al. \(2026\)](#) find that accreditation readiness benefits stakeholders, though their single-school design limits generalization. The parallel is that NCEE pass rates, like accreditation results, became public signals of school quality—which, as the findings below show, turned the examination into an instrument of competition among schools as well as selection among students.

Conceptual Framework

This study analyzes the NCEE through six connected concepts. *Standardization* is the application of a uniform instrument and uniform cut-offs to all candidates; it is the examination's design principle. *Meritocracy and fairness* name the normative claim standardization is meant to serve—that selection should reward ability—and the conditions (comparable opportunity to learn, valid score use) under which that claim holds ([American Educational Research Association et al., 2014](#); [Zwick, 2002](#)). *Assessment validity*, following [Kane \(2013\)](#), directs attention to the defensibility of the use made of NCEE scores (barring college entry) rather than to the instrument in isolation. *Gatekeeping* is the examination's selective function: legitimate when exclusion tracks construct-relevant ability, problematic when it tracks circumstance. *Social reproduction* ([Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990](#)) supplies the mechanism by which a uniform test applied to unequal schools converts social origin into examination outcomes, so that gatekeeping by score becomes, in effect, gatekeeping by background. *Academic freedom* identifies the institutional cost of centralization: a mandatory state examination displaces part of each institution's right to choose its students. The framework links these concepts as follows: standardization pursues meritocratic fairness through gatekeeping; whether it achieves fairness is a validity question that depends on equal opportunity to learn; where opportunity is unequal, social reproduction theory predicts systematically skewed exclusion; and centralized enforcement of the standard imposes an additional academic-freedom cost. The findings are organized to test each link of this chain against the documentary record: RQ1 addresses standardization and standard-setting, RQ2 addresses reproduction and fairness, RQ3 addresses the gatekeeping mechanics and validity of score use, and RQ4 addresses how policymakers weighed these considerations, including academic freedom, in choosing abolition.

Research Gap

Taken together, the literature establishes the general dilemma of centralized entrance examinations and offers fragmentary, mostly contemporaneous evidence on the NCEE, but it leaves the Philippine case incompletely documented. No previous study systematically analyzes the full official record of the NCEE's creation, adjustment, and abolition; separates legislators' claims from independently reported data; or explains why the Philippines—unlike China—resolved the standardization dilemma by abolition rather than reform. This study fills that gap by documenting the process.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative historical-policy study using document analysis as the main method. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents in which documentary data are examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). The analysis is historical in that documents are read in chronological and institutional context, and policy-analytic in that they are interrogated for the justifications, evidence, and effects of a specific government policy. The historical method is appropriate because it studies the tangible remains of the past as situated in official documents.

Primary and Secondary Documents

To accomplish this research, seventeen primary documents and eight published studies from the implementation period were analyzed. Primary documents were in the following repositories: the LawPhil Project of the Arellano Law Foundation and the Chan Robles Virtual Law Library, the Supreme Court E-Library and the digital archives of both chambers of the Philippine Congress. Published studies were retrieved through JSTOR and journal databases using the terms “NCEE,” and “Philippine education entrance examination.” The studies were limited initially to works published between 1974 and 1995 to capture the implementation period.

The documents included were (a) official government documents (decrees, statutes, orders, memoranda, legislative journals and records, constitutional deliberations) issued between 1973 and 1994 that directly concern the lifetime of the NCEE; (b) reports of international organizations addressed to the Philippine government during the period that discuss the NCEE (the 1975 ILO report); and (c) peer-reviewed studies reporting observations or data during the lifetime of the NCEE. All included documents were fully analyzed to create a census of the accessible official record. There are two main limitations. First, there are ministry issuances from the late 1970s not found in the online archive, and regional or division-level implementation records were outside the scope of the covered national repositories. Comparative and methodological literature (the Chinese examination studies and works on testing, fairness, and social reproduction) was used for framing and interpretation, not as evidence about the NCEE itself. Table 1 lists the primary documents and their roles in the analysis.

Table 1. Primary Documents Analyzed

Document	Date	Source / Archive	Type	Role in the Analysis
Presidential Decree No. 146	1973	LawPhil (Arellano Law Foundation)	Presidential decree	Founding policy; official rationale and standard-setting mandate (RQ1)
Letter of Instruction No. 783	1978	Chan Robles Virtual Law	Letter of instruction	Scope extension to foreign students (RQ1)

Document	Date	Source / Archive	Type	Role in the Analysis
		Library		
MECS Memorandum No. 56 (Corpuz)	1982	Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports	Ministry memorandum	Retake restrictions; special NCEE eligibility (RQ3)
MECS Order No. 9 (Corpuz)	1984	Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports	Ministry order	Exemptions from the requirement (RQ1, RQ3)
ILO, Sharing in Development	1975	ILO / NEDA	International organization report	Independent contemporaneous assessment; basic-education recommendations (RQ2)
1986 Constitutional Commission, RCC No. 69 (Aug. 29, 1986)	1986	Supreme Court E-Library	Constitutional Commission record	First official questioning of the NCEE; academic freedom and equity objections (RQ4)
DECS Order No. 17, s. 1988	1988	DepEd issuances archive	Department order	Field-specific cut-off percentiles (RQ1)
DECS Order No. 55, s. 1990	1990	DepEd issuances archive	Department order	Anti-falsification rule; evidence of circumvention (RQ3)
House Bill No. 1229 with Explanatory Note (Montejo)	1992	House of Representatives Legislative Library	Bill and explanatory note	Redundancy and fairness arguments for abolition (RQ3, RQ4)
Committee Report No. 43 (Education and Culture; Appropriations)	1992	House of Representatives Library and Archives	Committee report	Substitution of HB 5111; proposed NSAT replacement (RQ4)
Congressional Record, House (Dec. 8, 1992)	1992	House of Representatives Library and Archives	Plenary record	Sponsorship remarks (Escudero, Lacson); tracking stigma and cost arguments (RQ3, RQ4)
Roco Sponsorship Speech, SB 1515	Apr. 12, 1994	Senate Records and Archives Division, CP-Senate TSP (103)	Sponsorship speech	Pass-rate differentials reported by Sec. Fabella; rural disadvantage; stigma (RQ2-RQ4)
Senate Journal / TSP	Apr.	Senate Records	Plenary	Counter-arguments

Document	Date	Source / Archive	Type	Role in the Analysis
(104), Maceda interpellation	12, 1994	and Archives Division	record	defending the NCEE; negative case (RQ1, RQ4)
Senate Journal / (119), Maceda interpellation (cont.)	May 12, 1994	Senate Records and Archives Division	Plenary record	Felipe et al. (1986) predictive-validity claim; bar-exam analogy (RQ1, RQ4)
Conference Committee Report on SB 1515 / HB 5111; TSP (130)	Jun. 1, 1994	Senate Records and Archives Division	Conference report	Final legislative design: deletion of NSAT; retroactivity (RQ4)
Republic Act No. 7731	1994	LawPhil (Arellano Law Foundation)	Statute	Abolition; retroactive relief for past failures (RQ4)
DECS Order No. 28, s. 1994 (Fabella)	1994	Department of Education, Culture and Sports	Department order	Implementation of abolition; cancellation and refunds (RQ4)

Analytical Procedure

The documents were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) adapted to documentary data within Bowen's (2009) document-analysis procedure of skimming, reading, and interpretation, and situated in a historical-policy frame that preserved chronology and institutional authorship. The coding process proceeded in three stages. First, each document was read in full and openly coded for statements about the examination's purpose, standards, mechanics, effects, and proposed alternatives; every coded segment was logged with its document, date, page or session reference, and speaker or issuing authority. Second, open codes were grouped into categories (for example, "cut-off adjustment," "pass-rate disparity," "retake restriction," "duplication," "stigma," "academic freedom," "cost," "circumvention"). Third, categories were consolidated into the six themes reported in the Findings, each mapped to a research question. Theme development was iterative: themes were drafted after coding the legislative record, then tested against the earlier ministry issuances and the ILO report, and revised where the earlier documents qualified or contradicted the later claims.

Two rules governed the treatment of evidence. First, *speaker attribution*: every claim was classified by its evidentiary status—(a) provisions of law or official orders, (b) statistics reported in official documents with an identified source, (c) findings of contemporaneous published studies, or (d) assertions made by legislators or officials in debate. Category (d) statements were treated as arguments, not facts, and are reported in the Findings as attributed claims. Second, *cross-checking*: political statements were checked against other sources wherever possible. For example, Senator Roco's characterization of the examination as discriminatory was checked against the pass-rate figures he attributed to Education Secretary Fabella, against Costello and Palabrica-Costello's (1981) independent score data, and against the ILO's (1975) assessment; Senator Maceda's defense of the examination was checked against the Felipe et al. (1986) study he cited and against Tibigar's (1995) retention figures. Where sources conflicted—most notably between Maceda's and Roco's readings of the same pass-rate evidence—the conflict itself was coded and is reported as such, and

the Maceda interpellations were analyzed deliberately as a negative case against the emerging interpretation that the examination's effects were exclusionary.

Trustworthiness

Four procedures were used to support the trustworthiness of the analysis ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)). Source triangulation: each finding rests on at least two independent documents or on one official document corroborated by a contemporaneous published study; findings supported by a single source are flagged as such in the text. Audit trail: the document inventory (Table 1), the coding log linking each coded segment to its document and locator, and the theme-development memos were retained, and Table 2 in the Findings reproduces the finding-to-document mapping so that readers can trace how each conclusion was produced. Negative case analysis: the pro-NCEE record ([Valisno, 1977](#); the Maceda interpellations; Tibigar's retention data) was analyzed with the same procedure as the critical record, and the Findings report where it withstands scrutiny and where it does not. Reflexivity: the author approached the topic aware that the NCEE's abolition is retrospectively popular in the Philippines and guarded against confirmation of the abolitionist narrative by defining gatekeeping neutrally, by separating legislators' rhetoric from data, and by treating reported percentages as descriptive rather than causal evidence, as elaborated below.

Interpretation of Quantitative Reports

Several documents report percentages (pass rates by school type, cut-off percentiles, retention gains). These figures are treated as descriptive indicators recorded in the documentary record, not as causal proof. A pass-rate differential between school types is consistent with unequal preparation but cannot, by itself, establish that the examination caused exclusion independently of prior schooling, nor can a post-implementation rise in college retention establish that the examination caused the rise. The Findings therefore state what each figure shows, who reported it, and what alternative explanations remain open.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized into six themes corresponding to the research questions: standard-setting (RQ1); unequal preparation and rural or socioeconomic disadvantage (RQ2); retake restrictions, duplication, and circumvention (RQ3); vocational tracking and stigma (RQ3); academic freedom (RQ3–RQ4); and the choice of abolition over reform (RQ4). Throughout, provisions of law and official orders, statistics reported in documents, findings of contemporaneous studies, and legislators' assertions are labeled as such. Table 2, at the end of this section, maps each finding to the documents from which it was produced.

Theme 1. Standard-Setting: An Adjustable National Threshold (RQ1)

The original degree defined the NCEE as a quality instrument. [Presidential Decree No. 146 \(n.d.-a\)](#) declared it "a policy of the State to maintain the highest quality of education for purposes of national development" and made passing the national examination "a prerequisite for admission to any post-secondary academic or professional degree program necessitating a minimum of four years' study" in any public or private institution (sec.1). [Presidential Decree No. 146 \(n.d.-a\)](#) vested the Secretary of Education and Culture with power to determine examination structure and to determine exemptions, which is the legal basis of the documented adjustments in threshold. Letter of Instruction No. 783 later extended the requirement to foreign students ([Chan Robles Law Firm, n.d.](#)), and MECS Order No. 9 defined the exempt categories ([Corpuz, 1984](#)).

The record shows that the passing standard was not fixed but managed. In the early years the cut-off stood at the 30th percentile ([Danskin, 1979](#)). By 1988, DECS Order No. 17 set the general

cut-off at the 50th percentile while requiring the 60th percentile for education, medical technology, and nursing programs ([Department of Education, n.d.-a](#)) an explicit use of the examination to impose higher entry standards on fields with professional stakes. The direction then reversed: [Tibigar \(1995\)](#) records that the cut-off was lowered to the 19th percentile by 1992 and to the 10th by 1993, with institutions permitted to set their own requirements in the name of academic freedom. Read as a sequence, these adjustments show a genuine standard-setting function which receded due to public criticism. Therefore, by 1993 the examination's gatekeeping role had already been largely conceded before its formal abolition.

Two claims in the record associate NCEE performance with college outcomes, and both require careful labeling. First, [Tibigar \(1995\)](#) reports a mean increase of 5.26% in college completion after the NCEE's implementation. This figure is an effect comparison, not a controlled estimate; rising retention could reflect the examination's screening, but also curricular changes, enrollment shifts, or economic conditions in the same period, so it is treated here as consistent with—not proof of—a screening effect. Second, during the May 12, 1994 interpellations, Senator Ernesto Maceda cited a 1986 study by Felipe, Arong, Ibe, Deauna, and Salazar finding that students with higher NCEE scores earned better college grades ([Senate of the Philippines, 1994b](#)). This is a legislator's citation of a study not independently examined in this research; if accurate, it indicates a positive predictive association between NCEE scores and college grades, which is the standard evidence for an admissions test's criterion validity, though it says nothing about whether students below the cut-off could also have succeeded. Maceda's further assertion that high failure rates showed the examination was working ([Senate of the Philippines, 1994a](#)) is an argument, not evidence: a failure rate demonstrates that the gate excluded people, not that it excluded the right people.

Theme 2. Unequal Preparation: Rural and Socioeconomic Disadvantage (RQ2)

The earliest independent assessment in the corpus anticipated the pattern the legislature would document two decades later. The [International Labour Organization \(1975\)](#) advised that the NCEE could serve to screen applicants but warned that screening alone was insufficient: it recommended coupling the examination with student aid and with improvement of primary education, on the reasoning that wealthier students and better-resourced schools would otherwise hold a systematic advantage. [Perlman \(1978\)](#) recorded the same concern among Filipino educators and observed that rural poverty would depress provincial performance. [Costello and Palabrica-Costello \(1981\)](#) then supplied independent empirical support: among high school seniors in Cebu City, students in private sectarian schools scored higher on the NCEE than public school students, and family background correlated with scores. In terms of the study's evidence classification, the ILO report is an independent contemporaneous assessment, and the Costello study is independent score data; later documentary evidence proved consistent with Perlman's concerns, although—as discussed below—the record supports an association between school circumstance and NCEE outcomes rather than a demonstration that the examination itself caused the disadvantage.

The most consequential figures appear in the abolition debates. In his April 12, 1994 sponsorship speech for Senate Bill No. 1515, Senator Raul Roco reported the testimony of Education Secretary Armand Fabella before the committee hearings: approximately 60% of examinees from religious (private sectarian) schools passed the NCEE, about half of those from national high schools passed, and only about 30% of those from barangay high schools passed ([Roco, 1994](#)). In fact, Senator [Roco \(1994\)](#) reported that, based on Secretary Fabella's testimony, "there is a definite pattern of discrimination against students from lower income levels that seems to be built into the tests" (39).

Interpreted strictly, these are descriptive pass-rate differentials by school type, as reported by the education secretary and relayed in a sponsorship speech; the underlying tabulations were not appended to the record. They do not prove that the examination was intentionally discriminatory. However, they are equally consistent with the examination accurately measuring real preparation gaps produced by unequal schools. What they establish, following the working definition, is a disparate exclusionary effect: whatever the examination measured, the exclusion it produced fell about twice as heavily on barangay high school students as on private sectarian school students. This documentary finding triangulates with the independent Cebu City score data (Costello & Palabrica-Costello, 1981) and with the ILO's (1975) prediction, which is why the study treats the disparity itself, though not its mechanism, as well-supported.

Roco (1994) added a further mechanism: the examination assumed familiarity with news, mass media, and urban general knowledge that children in rural areas, in 1994, largely without access to emerging information technology, lacked. This is a legislator's assertion about test content; no item-level analysis of the NCEE survives in the corpus to verify it. It is, however, consistent with Manalang's (1977) earlier warning that mass failure would translate into unemployed high school graduates concentrated where schooling was weakest, and with the International Labour Organization's (1975) position that the binding constraint was the quality of primary education, not the absence of a screen. On this theme, the record thus contains one point of genuine conflict: Valisno (1977) argued from the first administration's results (249,000 of 332,000 examinees qualifying) that the examination was not unduly exclusionary. The two readings are reconcilable once the threshold history is recalled, a 30th-percentile cut-off excludes a minority overall while still excluding disproportionately by school type, so the negative case qualifies the severity, but not the existence, of the disparity.

Theme 3. Restrictive Mechanics: Retakes, Duplication, and Circumvention (RQ3)

Three implementation rules placed the burden on examination costs on students. First, retakes were generally unavailable. Under MECS Memorandum No. 56, the special NCEE was open only to returning Filipino citizens, examinees who fell ill before the regular examination, and passers who had been unable to enroll; ordinary failers had no route to a second attempt at the regular examination (Corpuz, 1982). Representative Cirilo Roy Montejó's (1992) explanatory note to House Bill No. 1229 pressed the fairness implication: a single misfortune on examination day could affect a student's educational future. The contrast legislators drew with other Philippine examinations is instructive and is preserved in the record: Senator Maceda defended the NCEE by analogy to the bar examination's low passing rate (Senate of the Philippines, 1994a), but the analogy fails on the retake rule: the bar examination allows for infinite attempts, while the NCEE did not. This classifies Maceda's analogy as an argument that the documentary record itself undermines.

Second, the examination duplicated institutional admission tests. Montejó (1992) argued that the NCEE was redundant because a student who passed it could still be rejected by universities. Representative Salvador Escudero III, sponsoring the substitute bill for the House Committee on Education and Culture, noted that the NCEE had made sense when it was the only entrance examination but that colleges and universities had since instituted their own (House of Representatives, 1992). The practical consequence recorded in the debates was double testing: students bore the burden, and the national result decided nothing for institutions that trusted their own instruments.

Third, the record documents circumvention, which indicates that the examination's authority was eroding from below. DECS Order No. 55, s. 1990, required NCEE ratings to be entered on students' transcripts precisely because of result falsification (Department of Education, n.d.-b).

[Roco \(1994\)](#) recounted that as early as the 8th Congress a youth representative had reported NCEE questions being sold on Recto Avenue, and cited the case of a salutatorian who failed the NCEE yet was admitted by the University of the Philippines on the strength of its own entrance test—evidence, in his telling, that even the state university did not take the NCEE seriously. These are attributed anecdotes rather than systematic data, but the anti-falsification order is an official document whose existence independently corroborates that circumvention was widespread enough to require regulation.

Theme 4. Vocational Tracking and Stigma (RQ3)

The record from both chambers converges on the tracking effect. Sponsoring the substitute bill in December 1992, Representative Escudero stated that the NCEE relegated flunkers to second-class status, destined for technical courses ([House of Representatives, 1992](#)); [Roco \(1994\)](#) made the same point in the Senate, arguing that the examination had turned technical-vocational education into the designated destination of NCEE flunkers and that this stigma undermined the newly enacted TESDA framework. Representative Escudero, as recorded in the Congressional Record, of the [House of Representatives \(1992\)](#), stated that “it is built-in in the mode or conceptualization of the NCEE that those who do not make the grade are considered second-class high school graduates and therefore destined to take technical or vocational courses” (853). The claim that the stigma was produced by centralized examination policies rather than by anything intrinsic to technical education is supported, indirectly, by post-abolition developments: by the 2020s, most enrollees in technical-vocational courses were college graduates acquiring additional skills ([Chi, 2023](#)). Even with an indirect inference due to changing times, the documentary sequence (tracking rule, contemporaneous stigma testimony, post-abolition normalization) is consistent with the tracking mechanism described in the framework.

Theme 5. Academic Freedom and Centralization (RQ3–RQ4)

Official questioning of the NCEE began in the 1986 Constitutional Commission, eight years before abolition. In the August 29, 1986 session, Commissioner Jose Nollado asked whether a mandatory NCEE trampled on a student’s right to choose a program of study; Commissioner Florangel Rosario Braid argued that in practice the examination advantaged the wealthy; Commissioner Serafin Guingona warned that field-specific percentiles allowed the state to impose its own priorities on students’ choices; and Commissioner Chito Gascon, the youth representative, questioned the examination in its existing form—while favoring reform, not abolition—on the ground that private institutions already administered their own tests ([Supreme Court of the Philippines, n.d.-a](#)). These deliberations matter for two reasons. First, they show that equity and academic-freedom objections were on the official record well before the 1992–1994 bills, so abolition was the culmination of a documented policy argument rather than a sudden legislative mood. Second, they connect the NCEE to constitutional doctrine: the same academic-freedom reasoning was later applied by the Supreme Court in 2021 to strike down the mandatory Philippine Law School Admission Test ([Supreme Court of the Philippines, n.d.-b](#)), which is why this study concludes that a revived mandatory NCEE would likely be unconstitutional today. In the abolition debates themselves, Escudero framed the duplication point in academic freedom: a compulsory national examination layered over institutional tests encroached on institutions’ right to select their students ([House of Representatives, 1992](#))—and Roco answered Maceda’s defense with the washback objection that senior year was being converted into an NCEE review course, teaching students to pass a test rather than to build usable skills ([Senate of the Philippines, 1994b](#)), an objection that matches the high-stakes testing literature’s predictions ([Madaus, 1988](#); [Au, 2009](#)).

Theme 6. Why Abolition Rather Than Reform (RQ4)

The legislative endgame is fully documented. In the House, Montejó's House Bill No. 1229 (1992) was substituted by the Committees on Education and Culture and on Appropriations with House Bill No. 5111, which would have replaced the NCEE with a National Secondary Assessment Test (NSAT) that informed grades but did not bar college entry ([House of Representatives Committee on Education and Culture & Committee on Appropriations, 1992](#))—a reform, not an abolition. Representative Jose Carlos Lacson's sponsorship remarks added the fiscal argument: the funds spent administering the examination could instead raise barangay high school teachers' salaries, build classrooms, and support free secondary education ([House of Representatives, 1992](#)), which echoes the [ILO's \(1975\)](#) recommendation to invest in basic education rather than rely on a screen. In the Senate, Roco's Senate Bill No. 1515 (consolidating bills by Senators Mercado and Ramos-Shahani) went further, and in conference the Senate's position prevailed: the Conference Committee Report of June 1, 1994 records that the House accepted the deletion of the NSAT requirement and the Senate's retroactivity provision ([Senate of the Philippines, 1994c](#)). The Senate approved the report 11–2, and on June 2, 1994, President Fidel V. Ramos signed Republic Act No. 7731 ([Arellano Law Foundation, n.d.-b](#)).

The law provided that those who failed the NCEE “shall no longer be denied or refused enrollment by any school, college or university to any post-secondary program ... subject to the admission requirements of the institutions concerned,” and Section 3 provides that “[n]o national entrance examination shall be required for admission to post-secondary degree programs” ([Arellano Law Foundation, n.d.-b](#)). The retroactivity clause is analytically significant: by reopening college admission to every student excluded since 1974, Congress treated the examination's past exclusions as injuries to be remedied, not standards to be preserved. Implementation followed immediately: DECS Order No. 28, s. 1994, cancelled the pending special NCEE and refunded registrants ([Fabella, 1994](#)), leaving institutional admission requirements as the only remaining gate.

Legislators went for abolition instead of reform for three reasons. First was the equity evidence. Fabella's pass-rate differentials, corroborated by the earlier independent studies persuaded the sponsors that the examination's exclusions tracked school circumstance, which no recalibration of a uniform national test could cure while basic education remained unequal. Second, the duplication and academic-freedom objections meant that even a fairer national examination would remain redundant for the institutions that mattered and constitutionally suspect after 1987. Third, the threshold history showed that reform had already been tried from within: the cut-off had been differentiated by field, then lowered to the 19th and finally the 10th percentile, and a gate that excludes almost no one no longer justifies its cost. This was the point of Lacson's fiscal argument. In the framework's terms, the legislature concluded that the validity of the score's use could not be repaired ([Kane, 2013](#); [Heubert & Hauser, 1999](#)), that the reproduction mechanism lay in the schools rather than in the instrument, and that the standardization project should therefore be dismantled rather than recalibrated.

Summary Table: From Documents to Findings

Table 2. Mapping of Findings to the Reviewed Documents

Theme (RQ)	Finding	Supporting Documents / Studies	Evidentiary Status and Cautions
1. Standard-setting (RQ1)	The NCEE was an adjustable national	PD 146 (1973); Danskin (1979); DECS Order 17, s.	Provisions of law and official orders;

Theme (RQ)	Finding	Supporting Documents / Studies	Evidentiary Status and Cautions
	threshold: 30th percentile early on; 50th/60th by field in 1988; lowered to 19th (1992) and 10th (1993).	1988; Tibigar (1995)	percentile history from a published measurement journal.
1. Standard-setting (RQ1)	Officials associated NCEE performance with college success (retention gain of 5.26%; Felipe et al. 1986 grade association).	Tibigar (1995); Senate Journal, May 12, 1994 (Maceda citing Felipe et al., 1986)	Before/after statistic and a legislator-cited study; association only, no causal or counterfactual evidence.
2. Unequal preparation (RQ2)	Exclusion fell disproportionately by school type: ~60% pass (private sectarian), ~50% (national HS), ~30% (barangay HS), per Sec. Fabella as reported by Sen. Roco.	Roco (1994); triangulated with Costello & Palabrica-Costello (1981); ILO (1975); Perlman (1978)	Descriptive pass-rate differentials relayed in a speech; underlying tabulations not in record; disparity well-triangulated, mechanism not established.
3. Restrictive mechanics (RQ3)	No ordinary retakes; special NCEE limited to narrow categories; duplication with institutional tests; documented circumvention (falsified results, leaked items).	MECS Memo 56 (1982); Montejo (1992); House of Representatives (1992); DECS Order 55, s. 1990; Roco (1994)	Official orders establish the rules; circumvention anecdotes are attributed claims corroborated by the anti-falsification order.
4. Vocational stigma (RQ3)	Tracking flunkers into technical-vocational courses generated stigma that outlived the policy's intent.	House of Representatives (1992, Escudero); Roco (1994); Chi (2023)	Legislators' statements from both chambers; post-abolition normalization is indirect, consistent evidence only.
5. Academic freedom (RQ3-RQ4)	Equity and academic-freedom objections were on the official record from 1986; the same doctrine later invalidated the PhilSAT.	Supreme Court of the Philippines (n.d.-a, 1986 ConCom RCC 69); House of Representatives (1992); Supreme Court of the Philippines (n.d.-b, 2021)	Constitutional deliberations and a Supreme Court decision; doctrinal, not empirical, evidence.

Theme (RQ)	Finding	Supporting Documents / Studies	Evidentiary Status and Cautions
6. Abolition over reform (RQ4)	Congress rejected the NSAT reform, abolished the NCEE retroactively, and redirected the rationale toward basic-education investment.	Committee Report 43 (1992); Senate of the Philippines (1994c); RA 7731 (1994); Fabella (1994, DECS Order 28); House of Representatives (1992, Lacson); ILO (1975)	Legislative records and statute; the three-part explanation of the choice is the study's interpretation of the documented arguments.

Note. Evidentiary status categories follow the classification in the Research Method: provisions of law/official orders; official document statistics; contemporaneous published studies; and attributed assertions of legislators or officials.

Discussion

Read against the conceptual framework, the record shows the standardization chain breaking at the fairness link. The NCEE genuinely standardized (Theme 1) and there is documentary support for an association between its scores and college performance (Theme 1), so the instrument was not meaningless. But the meritocratic claim required comparable opportunity to learn ([American Educational Research Association et al., 2014](#); [Zwick, 2002](#)), and the triangulated evidence of Theme 2 shows that opportunity was not comparable: the examination sat atop schools whose resources differed sharply, and its exclusions distributed accordingly—the disparate-effect pattern that social reproduction theory predicts ([Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990](#)). The mechanics of Theme 3 then aggravated a defensible screen into a harsh one—single-attempt, duplicative, and increasingly circumvented—precisely the configuration the high-stakes testing literature warns against ([Heubert & Hauser, 1999](#); [Madaus, 1988](#)). On the study's definitions, the documentary record therefore supports three carefully bounded conclusions: the NCEE functioned as a standard-setting mechanism whose thresholds the state actively managed; it also functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism whose exclusionary effects were discriminatory in the disparate-effect sense, concentrating on barangay and rural public school students; and the conditions under which the second function dominated the first were the persistent inequality of basic education and the single-score, no-retake, compulsory design. What the record does not support—and this study does not claim—is that passers were thereby proven qualified in any validated sense, or that there was any intention by the policy framers to discriminate. The Philippine resolution of the standardization dilemma, abolition with retroactive remedy, contrasts with the Chinese path of continual reform ([Liu, 2013](#); [Wang, 2013](#)), and the contrast is explained by the structural differences identified in the literature review: a threshold test duplicating autonomous institutional admissions in a constitutional order protective of academic freedom had, by 1994, no constituency that a placement examination in a centralized system retains

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to determine, from the official documentary record to what extent, in what ways, and under what conditions the NCEE functioned as a standard-setting mechanism, an exclusionary gatekeeping mechanism, or both. The answer the record supports is: both, sequentially and conditionally. As a standard-setting mechanism, the examination gave the state a working national threshold that it calibrated by field and through time (RQ1). As a gatekeeping mechanism, its exclusions fell disproportionately—by roughly a factor of two in the pass rates reported to the Senate—on students of barangay and rural public high schools (RQ2), and its single-

attempt, compulsory, duplicative design converted unequal preparation into permanent exclusion (RQ3). The condition under which the gatekeeping function overwhelmed the standard-setting function was the one the ILO identified in 1975 before the first cohort had even finished the examination cycle: a uniform test imposed on an unequal school system distributes its exclusions by circumstance. On the disparate-effect definition adopted in this study, the examination's implementation was discriminatory; on the intent definition, the record supports no finding.

The abolition of 1994 (RQ4) is best understood not as a rejection of assessment but as a legislative judgment that this particular use of a score barring college entry nationwide on a single attempt could not be made fair by recalibration. Congress chose retroactive abolition; the retroactivity clause of Republic Act No. 7731 is the clearest documentary evidence that the legislature had come to regard the examination's past exclusions as injuries rather than standards. The washback objection recorded in the Senate debates and the stigma that the tracking rule attached to technical-vocational education were the problems that outweighed the examination's screening value.

Three implications follow. First, for policy: the documentary record counsels that national assessments should diagnose the system rather than penalize students. The NCEE's defensible legacy is the evidence of inequality it gave to legislators, and its indefensible one is that students bore the consequences of that inequality. Any future centralized assessment should avoid admission risks and come with the investment in basic education that the ILO recommended in 1975. Second, for constitutional design: the Supreme Court's 2021 PhilSAT ruling, which invalidated a mandatory admission test on academic-freedom ground. This test was introduced by the [Legal Education Board \(n.d.\)](#) to screen potential law students and allowed multiple retakes. This did not save it from invalidation. This was the same ground raised against the NCEE from the 1986 Constitutional Commission onward, indicates that a compulsory revival of the NCEE would likely be unconstitutional; if a national examination were ever restored, the record suggests it could serve at most as an optional instrument for institutions without their own tests, not a standardized admission test for all. Third, for scholarship: the NCEE offers a rare, fully archived case of a completed national examination policy cycle. This study's document-based reconstruction also specifies which claims about it rest on law, which on reported data, and which on political assertion, a distinction earlier accounts blurred.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study's conclusions are bounded by its evidence. It is a qualitative document analysis of the official national record: it captures what decrees, orders, legislative journals, an international report, and contemporaneous studies say, but not the experiences of NCEE takers or individual schools. Several specific limitations follow. First, the pivotal pass-rate differentials entered the record through a sponsorship speech reporting the education secretary's committee testimony; the underlying tabulations could not be located, so the figures are treated as reported statistics rather than verified data. Second, the predictive-validity claim rests on a legislator's citation of the Felipe et al. (1986) study, which could not be independently retrieved. Third, some ministry policies of the late 1970s were not found in the online archive, so the threshold history between 1974 and 1988 relies on published secondary accounts. Fourth, because Philippine education governance is highly centralized, a national-documents design is informative, but it cannot show how divisions and individual schools implemented or buffered the policy. Fifth, retrospective sympathy for the abolition is widespread in the Philippines. Despite the reflexivity and negative-case procedures described in the method, interpretation of a one-sided surviving record cannot fully escape that context.

Further research could address these limits directly. Oral-history studies of former NCEE takers would supply the experiential evidence this design excludes, and case studies of barangay high schools would show how under-resourced schools prepared students for the examination. Archival work in the Department of Education's records could recover the missing tabulations behind the Fabella figures and the Ministry orders, therefore permitting a quantitative re-analysis of pass-rate disparities. A comparative study of the National Medical Admission Test, as a similar standardized examination, would test whether the design features identified neutralize the exclusionary dynamics this study documented. Finally, research linking entrance-examination statistics to school benchmarking could examine, with modern data, the signaling function that this study could only trace historically.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOL USE DECLARATION

While preparing the work, the author used Claude. AI to ensure proper clarity and flow of the revisions. After using the tool, the author reviewed, edited, and verified the text to ensure preservation of original ideas, and takes full responsibility and accountability for the final content.

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