

CUET must be more than just a selection system

As thousands of school leavers navigate their pandemic-hit aspirations for higher education, the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) is being rolled out for the first time.

CUET is being offered as a potential game changer, a more equitable process for opening a wider canvas of access and choice to quality higher education. Its stated purpose is to provide students a single-window opportunity for admission, eliminating arbitrary bias. Those otherwise left out on account of unrealistic cut-offs and widely different marking schemes adopted by different school boards will now benefit from a more level-playing field.

With 149,000 registrations spread over 500 cities, CUET is being held in phases. A computer-generated test is based on the Class XII National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) syllabus with multiple choice questions (MCQs). The first cohort has navigated unprecedented uncertainties during Covid-19, such as a two-phase Class XII board exam, and being informed rather late in the term about the new test. A robust orientation for the stakeholder community still struggling to fully comprehend the implications of CUET well before its whistle-stop implementation could have reduced anxiety levels.

Inevitable teething problems such as scheduling glitches and multiple exams slotted on the same day have been largely assuaged. But concerns linger about normalisation of marks for students being examined on the same subject on different days, tiebreakers for identical marks, and possible formats for interdisciplin-

ary courses and emerging disciplines, especially at the post-graduate level. A massive operation such as this needs a large secretariat, planning, expertise, ability to respond to contingencies and a huge security apparatus to check malpractice. It must, consequently, remain a work in progress.

CUET undoubtedly provides a much-needed corrective to the irrational and unsustainable system of cut-offs and frees students from the frenetic pressure and expense of taking multiple entrance exams. Yet questions remain. Will CUET indeed be an equaliser or be skewed against state boards and schools without NCERT textbooks? How will it do away with merit lists? Will it give a further fillip to a rapacious coaching industry? Will schools, anxious about being assessed on their students' performance in CUET, alter the thrust of their pedagogy? Will CUET be yet another exam that sidesteps the real problem of few higher educational institutions (HEIs) of quality to meet the needs triggered by the "massification" of higher education? Will it provide qualitatively better outcomes? Above all, will it foreground the spirit of critical thinking that the National Education Policy (NEP) so categorically advocates?

Years ago, with the exponential increase in the numbers of admission seekers, consistent public pressure for simplified procedures and administrative convenience, large public universities, such as Delhi University (with over 77 colleges) and Mumbai University (with over 700), shifted to centralised registration pro-

cesses. The standardisation of admission criteria in the interest of transparency came at the cost of pluralism and diversity. Several colleges (other than minority institutes) either lost or abdicated to their parent universities their crucial role in shaping the selection processes best suited to their own mission and vision. Today, universities seem set to similarly yield to the superstructures of the University Grants Commission and National Testing Agency.

The assumption that centralised processes are fairer remains largely unsubstantiated. A system that fetishises standardisation is inherently mechanistic-equipped to plot "output" and impervious to qualitative learning trajectories. Admissions solely on MCQs may paradoxically turn into an algorithm for weeding out, not selection. They subvert the very *raison d'être* of education reform by introducing a myopic managerialism into a space that, at its core, must reflect fecundity, diversity and pluralism. The NEP's vision of multi-disciplinary and holistic education requires this.

The transition from school to college is not only a rite of passage. It involves a perspectival shift on how knowledge is disseminated, produced and assimilated. It involves thinking about the thinking-process, developing reasoning skills, appreciating nuance and arriving at innovative alternatives beyond the confines of a purely received curricula where the textbook is treated as canon.

As educationist Ramakant Agnihotri points out, a purely achievement-oriented test that focuses on what a student has mastered from textbooks may not be quite suited to draw out the learner's imaginative and creative potential to engage "non-linearly" with alternatives or build fresh hypotheses, drawing on 'higher levels of cognitive engagement'. Such a process demands the active involvement of teachers to nurture this potential. They are best positioned

to assess applicants. Their role cannot be invisibilised or ceded completely to an anonymous system in the name of objectivity. Trusting their credibility is vital to making higher education work for students. Constructive proficiency-oriented assessment involves meticulous, hard work and cannot be compressed into two frenetic months. The best universities in the world take a year on an average to select and admit students. In addition to good grades, they include a positive attitude towards study, a passion for the chosen subject, the capacity to work and think independently, to complete tasks, an inquiring mind, good writing skills, an ability to work well with groups, co-curricular interests and so on. The applicant here is not merely a number. She represents potential!

CUET, therefore, must not end up as a technical fix to a moribund system of admission. It will best serve the more transformative exhortations of NEP if its scores set the minimum eligibility (not sole) requirement for admission, on the lines of SAT. These must be embellished by additional criteria that educators within HEIs craft and calibrate to reflect their distinctive aspirations. A monochromatic vision may indiscriminately flatten the much-needed heterogeneity of our diverse higher education ecosystem.

Let us heed Bertrand Russell's exhortation in 1926 for universities to resist becoming merely "training schools for professions" and nurture the spirit of freedom and adventure of a quest. In reclaiming the transformative potential of the academy, in sustaining an "educated democracy" by fostering the "voyage of discovery" (*a la Russell*) let our selection processes not miss the wood for the trees!



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The views expressed are personal