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Beyond CUET and Other Simplifications: Reassessing University Assessment

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What value are exams such as the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for assessing students? Can we imagine a more equitable and just method for admitting students to institutes of higher education and assessing their performance?

The Common University Entrance Test (CUET), which claims to fulfil the New Education Policy's (NEP) aim of making higher education equitable, accessible, and inclusive, has forced educationists and educators to rethink what these terms mean in the real world. Much has been written about the implementation of the CUET, how the exam can potentially aid the already flourishing coaching industry in the country, and how state boards have performed in the exam. Here we take a step back and try to think about what exams such as the CUET end up doing for assessment processes in universities and the ways in which we can imagine a more equitable and just method for admitting students to institutes of higher education and assessing their performance.

This returns us to the primary objective of education – teaching and instilling the ability to think critically, express oneself, and solve real-world problems. This objective is sidelined when we focus solely on setting up systems for testing and examining. By denying many access to higher education and dividing those admitted into good, average, and bad students, it exacerbates the already uneven structure of the university landscape.

In looking at the CUET, it becomes essential to tease out what tall claims tend to conceal. On the surface, there are declarations that the CUET had made the admission process 'convenient'. But a question that needs to be asked is for whom has the process been made convenient?

The CUET syllabus is based on that of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), which is used in schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). This immediately creates the perception that students from schools under state education boards will have to study more than what is in their regular curriculum to succeed in this exam. This imposition of a 'national' or so-called 'central' curriculum on state boards is legally questionable on the ground that it violates the Constitution. Much like the new Economically Weaker Section (EWS) amendment, which, contrary to its claim of reducing inequality, accentuates it by operating as a new 'reservation' for the upper castes, the CUET's convenience is also for those who are privileged.

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So, now, those from CBSE schools or those who are in a position to pay the coaching fees to be on a par with them are automatically ahead in line. However, all 'successes' and 'failures' are in these times attributed to the 'individual'. Further, the lowest CUET scores (795/800 for Psychology Honours, for instance) indicate that this exam is just as competitive as the earlier cut-off system.

We mention this because we believe that assessment cannot be divorced from social realities such as unequal access to quality education, lack of English language proficiency, and social and cultural capital. While the CUET is not the first standardised examination in the country, its peculiarity lies in that it goes against the fact that education is a concurrent subject in the Constitution, and that this will have grave consequences on how school education is imagined, conceptualised, and practised.

An exam like the CUET takes away from the rights of state governments and state education boards by proposing a 'one country, one exam' formula. It also makes State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERTs) obsolete because the NCERT syllabus is what the CUET follows.

One of the main functions of SCERTs is to develop teaching and learning materials, including textbooks, which are to be used in state-run schools. The CUET making the NCERT syllabus its official syllabus not only imposes an extra burden on students but also indicates that the work that the SCERTs do is going to become irrelevant in the near future. This can be seen as the centre intentionally diluting the rights of state governments, and it will adversely affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

What is the meaning of assessments such as this and what is the purpose of this exam? These are questions that an exam such as the CUET raises. Assessment techniques are a way of understanding the learning levels of students, but they also reinforce certain kinds of

learning and particular ways of thinking. What follows are the related questions of who can afford these kinds of learning and thinking?

Since the CUET is conceptualised and executed like any other competitive exam, are we equating school-leaving assessments with competitive tests? When an exam such as the CUET proposes that learning can be compressed into multiple-choice questions with one right answer, the message is loud and clear for everyone concerned. Only those parts of the syllabus that can be tested through multiple-choice questions, that can be quantified and reduced to the “one and only one” correct answer needs to be valued.

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If we look at the way the CUET questions were designed in 2022, we realise that most learning goals that curriculums set out to achieve were not being measured by the exam. The [National Curriculum Framework 2005](#) proposes that the content of Social Science subjects “should aim at raising students’ awareness through critically exploring and questioning familiar social reality.” It continues: “The possibilities of including new dimensions and concerns, especially in view of students’ own life experiences, are considerable.” But the questions asked in the exam test students for rote learning and memorisation of facts.

It remains unclear what kind of performance, thinking, and imagination the CUET aims to measure. However, it prioritises thinking of learning as something that can be tested through multiple-choice questions which are relevant to all students, and will also decide their ‘fitness’ for a college education.

Most of college education aims to impart knowledge about a subject and also develop a critical understanding about how knowledge of the discipline is created. But if the entrance to college happens via a process in which bite-size and digestible information about the discipline is valued, how does it affect school education and the teaching-learning processes?

Thinking of an alternative

While exams like the CUET for college admissions are not a new phenomenon (countries such as China and the US have similar exams), no exam in itself becomes the sole criterion for admitting or rejecting students to certain courses. In thinking of an alternative, we must decide what the process of college admission aims to determine.

Does it aim to ascertain the preparedness of the students who want to study a specific discipline? If so, what happens to those who want to change disciplines when they move to university? Or does the college entrance exam aim to determine if students have a minimum level of preparedness in terms of the skills that school education is supposed to have given them? But what happens to students who do not have access to quality school education?

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These are difficult questions and there are certainly no easy answers to them. But in thinking about an alternative to exams such as the CUET and the previous system of basing admissions on the results of the higher secondary exams, we need to first define what it is that we want to test the students for. And, in what ways can this testing be fair to all kinds of students in the country?

For this, a centralised system with the motto of ‘one country, one exam’ seems unintelligent. What we may need to think about is decentralising the exam and adding elements that can indicate a preparedness for higher education without basing it on cultural and social capital. This preparedness can be defined in a way that gives a meaningful yet measurable assessment of the skills and knowledge learners have acquired over their school years.

We need to remember that the mandate of universities is not just to work on students who come with some previous knowledge and exposure but also to give an opportunity to those who have been disadvantaged in any way. The admission process can aim to diagnose and categorise students on the basis of their mistakes and shortcomings, and make a conscientious effort to address this through the classroom and the curriculum.

In critically examining what the CUET entails, we require a close examination of what is being tested along with thinking of other ways in which assessments are invested with understanding a specific student’s requirements and needs and making adjustments

accordingly.

What is required to level the playing field, as the scholar of education Anita Rampal suggests, is to introduce a system that works with a broad equivalence across different education boards in terms of how the assessment is to be done. This, as she notes, will require an “authentic assessment,” which takes stock of a range of parameters to assess performance, as opposed to a “summative” one. Intangible as some of these may be, they could be key to understanding and tracking a student’s needs and further progress. Properly comprehending even a seemingly simple statement such as “They (student/teacher) have done well” requires one to spell out the exact criteria that allows one to arrive at the declaration.

Just as the architecture of a classroom, which offers a background to the teacher-student dynamic, can have a significant bearing on the learning that takes place, the manner in which assessments are carried out also has serious consequences for a student’s academic life. What is required is reorienting general education in meaningful ways that can be both measured and articulated.

One way of doing this could be having different levels at which assessments operate, which together will lend clarity to where a student stands. The screening done through multiple-choice questions could be supplemented by an analytical/descriptive section, which could be further complemented by an interview. The manner in which the Academic Bridge Programme (ABP) operates at Ashoka University offers some interesting insights to think about.

The ABP at Ashoka University is offered to first-year students coming from diverse academic backgrounds from different parts of India and from other countries where English is not the first language. The ABP entrance test is curated in such a fashion that it helps assess students’ capacities at different levels. The sorting rationale and process are based on students’ numeric scores and “meaningful indicators”, which include an on-the-spot essay and a “picture question” that tests not only students’ English proficiency but also their descriptive and analytical abilities.

As ABP instructor Krittika Bhattacharjee observes, the information received from the evaluation does not aim to be comprehensive, but it could nonetheless help us arrive at useful “labels” to better comprehend students’ academic abilities, ranging from proficiency in the language of instruction and an intuition for it to a capacity to think imaginatively and critically.

Instead of projecting assessment as the final act that closes a certain academic journey, it needs to be thought of as one stage in a long process where it becomes an important tool for improvement and refinement, both for the student and the evaluator. Just a mark “3/10” or “this is badly written” achieves little.

Poulomi Das, an assistant professor at Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Jindal Global University, points out that the evaluation can proceed in phases where one moves across different components. These components can include thinking about how apt the chosen topic is and its relevance to how the argument is structured and written, and what needs to be further done to make the learning more focused, productive, and streamlined.

Peer-to-peer review exercises or having students work in 'buddy groups' can go a long way in flattening out the otherwise hierarchical teacher-student dynamic and help ease the anxiety which is usually felt at the receiving end. The key thing to remember is that instructors/teachers are not absent from peer-review exercises. Rather, they play the role of facilitators and guide the session, providing checklists to be used to ensure that the participants walk away with actionable lessons to work on even as they 'assess' each other.

A revision of the assessment process has to simultaneously take stock of what precedes the evaluation. To expect 'originality' in arguments, for instance, would not work if enough attention has not been given to familiarising students with how to build on research. Similarly, revising the grading process will require that the thinking about what assessment stands for and its intended purpose (which is now primarily about who 'tops' and who 'fails') also has to undergo a change. Instead of projecting assessment as the final act that closes a certain academic journey, it needs to be thought of as one stage in a long process where it becomes an important tool for improvement and refinement, both for the student and the evaluator.

What is clear from the above is that any remodelling of the assessment system in a manner that can help gauge students’ requirements better will require both time and resources. The manner in which the NEP is being promoted by the state is in line with the drive to privatise initiatives, setting up enterprises geared solely towards churning out profits, banishing learning and critical thinking from the classroom. This is further worsened by efforts being made to render all education 'digital', which underlines the state’s abdication of responsibility towards public university education and ensuring accessibility to all.

With increasing precarity, a reduction in jobs, and rampant contractualisation in the academic sector, we are edging dangerously close to what Terry Eagleton termed more than a decade ago as “the death of universities.” While reassessing assessment, the urgent need is not only a strong critique of the obvious pitfalls of the 'new' scheme but also a return to thinking of alternative ways of approaching the issue that goes beyond the multiple-choice question mode of thinking.

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