

**Abstract**

The National Education Policy 2020 advocated radical reforms in Indian higher education. Introducing a Common University Entrance Test in central universities is one such measure, expected to save students time, energy, and costs and tackle the issue of steep cut-offs in colleges and universities. But it may lead to a proliferation of coaching companies, limiting access for students from vulnerable backgrounds. It may also limit universities' autonomy in selecting students, and erode diversity.

Introducing a Common University Entrance Test in India

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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 calls for a major transformation of Indian higher education through a regulatory overhaul and by fostering competition among public and private higher education institutions. Following up on the NEP 2020, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has already initiated reforms that have serious long-term implications on students, faculty, and institutions. Introducing a Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for undergraduate/integrated and postgraduate programs in universities is one such measure. This has serious implications for access, quality, and diversity in a hugely diverse federal country like India. Postsecondary entrance examinations are controversial and important everywhere. The current debate in India thus has global significance.

What Is the CUET?

Central universities in India are funded by the central government and are under the purview of the ministry of education. Currently, there are 54 central universities. Universities and colleges usually admit students on the basis of their grades in the 12th standard examination, or through entrance examinations conducted by the institutions. The CUET seeks to alter the existing admission process by conducting a single entrance examination for general courses at any participating university across the nation. It is a computer-based test consisting of multiple-choice questions in three sections (language, domain-specific, and general), to be conducted in 13 languages.

In 2021, the UGC advised all central universities to adopt the Central University Common Entrance Test (CUCET) for admitting students to undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) courses. The responsibility for conducting the test was assigned to the National Testing Agency, an independent body under the ministry of education. However, only 14 central universities decided to adopt the CUCET last year. This year, the UGC enforced the CUCET at all central universities and advised other universities to adopt the system as well. Accordingly, the test is now renamed Common University Entrance Test (CUET). Eventually, 12 state universities, 11 deemed universities, and 19 private universities adopted the CUET for UG admissions. By May 2022, over 1,151,319 candidates had registered for the CUET-UG for admissions for the academic year 2022–2023. Registration for the CUET for PG admissions is taking place at the time of writing this article.

Possible Positive Implications

The UGC argues that the CUET will benefit students immensely, allowing them to take a single-window test to seek admission to any course at the participating universities. Earlier, students had to apply to the universities and their affiliated colleges separately. They had to pay application fees to each institution and appear for multiple entrance examinations. The CUET will save them time, energy, and money.

Next, the CUET will tackle the issue of variation in grades across several regional and national boards of school education. In India, the 12th standard examination is conducted by several boards that have very different grading systems. To leverage their own students, some boards often inflate grades in the final examination. As a consequence, a steep rise in cut-off marks was observed in recent years for UG admissions, especially in reputed institutions. For instance, in 2021, Hindu College, affiliated to the University of Delhi, set a minimum of 99 percent cut-off for students to get admitted to the bachelor of economics program. Similarly, another college, the Miranda House, set the cut-off at 99.25 percent for political science. This cut-off system was inevitably biased against students coming from boards with a very strict grading system. However, universities participating in the CUET can still set a minimum percentage of marks in the 12th standard examination as eligibility criterion.

In addition, the CUET enables students to apply for any course, irrespective of the subjects studied at the higher secondary level. However, eligibility depends on the requirements specified by the universities. The CUET also provides an opportunity for students who did not do well in the 12th standard examination. As there is no minimum grade required for appearing for the CUET, they can now seek admission to their preferred universities based on their CUET scores.

Apprehension

There are a few pertinent issues that have fostered apprehension in the academic community about the efficacy of the CUET. First, Indian universities vary widely in terms of their history, reputation, quality, size, specializations, objectives, and purposes. So far, universities and their respective departments had the freedom of setting their own admission criteria according to the specific competencies that they wanted to see in their students. This is particularly important for disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, for which centers or schools may have very different approaches. Therefore, the CUET restricts their autonomy to select students best suited to their courses.

Second, the CUET is most likely to cause a proliferation of coaching companies, as observed with other national level examinations. In India, more than one-fifth of students across all education levels opt for supplementary private tuition outside their formal

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institutions. This phenomenon is referred to as “shadow education,” which runs parallel to the formal education system. The tendency among students to resort to private coaching increases considerably at the higher secondary level, in preparation for the national level entrance tests for engineering and medical programs. Accordingly, it is expected that the CUET will also lead to a mushrooming of private coaching institutions for generic courses. Some coaching institutions started advertising for their CUET-support services the day after it was formally announced by the UGC. As for other national examinations, this could be an impediment for students from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds, who cannot afford to pay for private coaching.

Third, the CUET undermines the role of school education at the higher secondary level, as the 12th standard board examinations cease to have a role in admission to UG programs. The 12th standard grades will still remain relevant, however, for admission to all other institutions than the 66 universities who have opted for the CUET. But the UGC expects all universities to adopt the CUET eventually. This move will limit the role of school education in shaping students’ future career paths. The UGC argues that the CUET will reflect a high correlation between 12th standard grades and CUET scores. But the CUET is based on a syllabus designed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, which is mostly followed by national boards. Regional school boards follow a different syllabus, and this will pose a challenge for their students to score well in the CUET.

Concluding Remarks

A national level entrance test is a prerequisite for accessing higher education in many countries. The unique challenges that it poses in India have their roots in its exam-oriented colonial education system. Given India’s digital divide and unequal social structure, a computer-based standardized test consisting of only multiple-choice questions will limit students’ ability to think and share their perspectives. This straightjacketing will erode diversity among higher education institutions. Instead of initiating a standardized test across the nation at this moment, focusing on improving quality and access in public schools and higher education institutions could be a better approach to improve the Indian education system. ▲