

THE CUET MANDATE WARRANTS CAUTIOUS IMPLEMENTATION

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There should have been debate | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Central universities may have been caught unawares when the University Grants Commission, or UGC (which looks into the 'coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of university education in India'), made it mandatory from this year for them to admit students in their undergraduate programmes solely on the basis and merit of scores in the Central University Entrance Test (CUET). They have little time to lose if they want to salvage their academic session. The National Testing Agency (NTA) of the Ministry of Higher Education, which has the responsibility of conducting the entrance tests for all the Central universities for the academic session 2022-23, has announced the details of the test. Registration began from April 2 and the application window will end on April 30. The test is tentatively scheduled for mid-July.

Few central universities appear ready to guide prospective students about certain essential details that they need while registering for the test. Students must know which language to choose. Since they can appear in a maximum of six out of the 27 domain knowledge subjects, they must know which are the ones which would be required by a university for admission to different courses. Universities with much larger numbers of undergraduate programmes need to take a cautious and careful call in this regard.

Central universities, apparently, have no option but to follow the mandate. A few that mustered the courage to seek an exemption have been denied this. The idea of academic autonomy and the argument that formalisation, uniformity, and standardisation often pull down quality to the lowest common denominator are unlikely to impress. The odds are stacked against them.

The institutions of national importance (INIs), i.e., the Indian Institutes of Technology, the Indian Institutes of Information Technology, the National Institutes of Technology, and the Indian Institutes of Management, already admit students on the basis of a single common entrance examination, either exclusively or in combination of past academic records. The Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (autonomous institutions under the Ministry of Education) are probably the only exception to follow a holistic approach. Since a significant proportion of INIs are ranked higher in national and world rankings than the central universities, none is likely to heed their cry that the CUET would lower their standards and quality.

Despite reservations by a few States, particularly Tamil Nadu, and also many self-financed private and minority medical colleges, the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (undergraduate), or NEET, has become obligatory for admission into medical programmes in all kinds and types of institutions across the country. Further, 12 central universities have been admitting students on the basis of a single common entrance test. Eight deemed universities have already consented to follow CUET scores and chances are that the remaining ones would also fall in line, as they are directly regulated by the UGC.

The arguments that entrance tests undermine the importance of board examinations and distract students from their studies in schools were given a goodbye a long time ago by the central universities themselves. Most admit students on the basis of their own entrance tests, often programme by programme. The CUET may find favour with students for it might widen their

academic choices and save them the cost, the hassle and the inconvenience of attempting many different tests, though they might realise later that the Central Board of Secondary Education-based test may pose a huge disadvantage to an overwhelmingly large number of students from the State Boards.

Concerns about the quality of the tests arising on account of the autonomy, competence, credibility and expertise of the NTA (which were pointed out so well in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020), may also not find many takers as only a few central universities would be able to show the validity, the reliability and the consistency of their own entrance tests. The NTA may have faltered in maintaining rigour, resulting in the leakage of national level tests, but universities too may not be able to prove that they have been very successful in having a foolproof system to design and conduct their own entrance tests.

The only large central university that has been admitting students on the basis of board marks so far has had its share of troubles. It has been criticised for fixing the cutoffs at such absurd levels that even those scoring centum were unsure of joining a college or course of their first choice.

This is not to argue that the CUET is the best method. World-class universities and the countries in which they are situated do not insist on admitting students singularly on the quantitative score of a common test. Instead, respecting the idea of academic autonomy, they grant their faculty the freedom to evolve holistic criteria for admission.

The NEP 2020 too while mentioning the need for 'a common principle for entrance examination' had emphasised the point that it should be done 'with due regard to the diversity and university autonomy'. Further, the policy mentions in no uncertain terms that 'it would be left to the individual universities and colleges to use NTA assessments for their admissions'.

Since the world is yet to invent a single best method of doing anything, the best possible method needs to be evolved through discussions, deliberations and in consultation with the stakeholders. It would have certainly been better, and in good taste, had the UGC taken the universities into confidence and given due consideration to their concerns.

The centrally-funded technical educational institutions, central universities, and deemed universities, put together, account for a mere 5.08% enrolment in higher education. The remainder, 94.92%, are in self-financed State private and public funded State universities, and their colleges.

As the UGC contemplates making the CUET mandatory for admission in all higher educational institutions across the country, it must realise that the anxieties, compulsions, concerns and realities of the State sector may be very different. Besides, higher education being in the concurrent list and, thus, a joint responsibility of the Union and State governments warrants that the States are taken into confidence before their institutions are subjected to a single common entrance test.

Finally, regulatory reforms, in particular the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), as prescribed by the NEP 2020, need to be expedited, as there is a built-in consultative mechanism in the form of the General Education Council (GEC), for the speedy and thoughtful implementation of the NEP.

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