The Promising Challenge of CUET: Weal and Woes

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Introduction

NTA has lately released the much-anticipated result of CUET UG-2024, amidst a recent quandary over NEET UG-2024. CUET or Common University Entrance Test UG, riding on NTA, is the third most popular public examination for undergraduate, postgraduate and PHD admissions into eminent Indian universities viz., JNU, DU etc. following JEE & NEET. However, the concept of CUET in praxis is not alien to the realm of higher education in India. CUCET (Central Universities Common Entrance Test) is CUET's empirical prelude, which was conducted from 2010 until 2020 by the Central University of Rajasthan for 12 central varsities until the Central government postulated CUET framework, a revamped version of CUCET, for streamlining admissions into all 45 central universities. NTA has orchestrated three iterations of CUET (UG) in India and abroad since 2022, with the second edition of 2023 being the most elaborate.

Navigating Impact

CUET as a systemic reform has impacted various segments of the scholastic community. Universities have now become an arena of multicultural diversity, attracting alumni nationwide. For instance, non-key colleges of the University of Delhi waxed into a catchment area for the local population, diminishing their identity to that of state institutes rather than central ones. CUET has now revitalised the multicultural and inclusive nature of such central colleges inside Delhi University, providing a decent environment for education and research.

A mushrooming effect in the coaching sector can be witnessed, with students dedicating time to CUET preparation by opting for dummy schools, diminishing their school participation. Before CUET, students were admitted based on senior-secondary results, thus creating disbalance amongst students of various state education boards. Introducing common entrance standards, CUET has now levelled the playing field to an extent, providing uniform

determinants of admission for all students, but has also adversely affected the significance and autonomy of State Education Boards.

However, CUET is on the road to becoming the next holy grail for students after JEE, NEET or CSE. Rapid commercialisation of educational facilities such as CUET puts such students at a loss who lack resources but not merit. It also harms the psychological and mental state of those who appear for the exam. It should be noted that CUET (UG) is conducted just a few months after the conclusion of the 12th Board examination. Board examination (Subjective type) and CUET (objective type) have a wide difference in format leaving students with no clue about the preparation techniques.

Key Issues

Recognizing the merit of the idea of CUET, there are still numerous hurdles in conducting effective and fair examinations. Students hailing from rural, remote, and backward regions and communities are disadvantaged in terms of logistics and access to technology. The digital process of examinations, counseling, and seat allocation puts several applicants in distress. A hybrid model of registration and allocation can be introduced, ensuring multiple points of facilitation for students, thus shifting focus to the facility of applicants rather than that of the institutions.

Another significant aspect is that although the examination is centralized, the post-examination admission procedure is yet decentralised, which requires students to apply at every university website separately. All have different last dates of application, date of result declaration and application fees creating a nightmare for an applicant going through the process for the first time. A common admission and seat allocation interface can be developed, facilitating a streamlined procedure for all Universities.

What further bewilders the process is the absence of official information on cutoffs of institutes federated to CUET configuration. This leaves students, who require relevant information on cut-off to tailor their preference list, contingent on various private academic entities that may disseminate misleading data to materialise their commercial motives. The vast domain of IT can be employed to prescribe suggestive preferences based on yesteryear cutoffs to students concerning college, course, university etc. since many applicants from rural heartland are oblivious to actualities of cutoffs which anchor one's admission. For instance, about eighty colleges affiliated to University of Delhi offer myriad courses in varied streams through CUET. This creates umpteen preferences in the form of colleges aligned with respective courses

regardless of the student's score, leading to confusion. Thus, a constrained ambit of choice for a student based on the previous year's cutoff would serve as the pole star in sailing through CUET conundrum.

The initial two iterations of CUET (2022 & 2023), espoused the provision of normalisation, which sought to revise the score of a student in a way that it became analogous with the score of other students because there were different sets of question papers for each academic discipline based on shifts of the exam. However, it drew flak from many students during 2022 & 2023, who deemed this procedure an arbitrary mid-course intervention owing to NTA's oblique modus operandi regarding normalisation in CUET. Although the NTA scrapped the policy of normalisation from this academic session, it should be noted that it serendipitously laid a scholastically robust foundation for especially the CUET-affiliated universities following the collegiate model in the post-CUET academic era.

For instance, as regards Delhi University, some analysts hold that many deserving students who would have landed in top colleges of DU by virtue of either their board percentage or their raw CUET score (pre-normalised) got enrolled at mediocre colleges of university on account of truncated normalised final scores, which ensued in an uneven spread of intellectual brilliance across the university. The policy of normalisation has been scrapped by NTA effective 2024, it has thus become seminal to standardise every question paper of each academic discipline, simply put, all question papers of a subject must correspond to each other in terms of difficulty level to avert incongruity in scorecards, modelled after let's say, CBSE board exams where different sets of question papers abide by concordant difficulty framework.

NTA must readopt Computer Based Mode in lieu of Pen and Paper mode considering its recent setback over transparency in NEET exams. Though it may sound like a pyrrhic idea, it might fetch benefits proportionately. CBT mode will not only result in greater transparency but also can be aptly leveraged to seamlessly dispense provisional e-mark sheets (subject to revaluation) of papers just after the exam. In the absence of normalisation, the faster delivery of results would imply a seamless admission process.

According to Dr Biswajit Mohanty, Associate Professor at the University of Delhi, and member of the American Political Science Association – "An important point of the contest is the autonomous and ambiguous nature of the National Testing Agency (NTA), which was formed in 2017 as a registered society under the Registration of Societies Act, of 1860. This establishes NTA as an institution outside the norm of checks and balances and adequate government

intervention which is integral for the transparent management of such an institute mandated to carry out national level examinations."

Dr Biswajit also points out an unfortunate lack of transparency and accountability within NTA. It has been pointed out that the NTA uses the National Emblem despite being registered as a society. Unlike CBSE and NAAC, NTA has not published a Memorandum of Association in the public domain. Such documents chalk out the objectives of any organisation during its formation and set the rules and regulations for its administration and functioning. NTA in its functioning, has been unable to consult various stakeholders associated with the examination process including the teachers and students. This creates a lack of communication with those affected and diminishes transparency and accountability.

It is worth noting that the governing body of NTA has five members concerned with JEE, as three directors of IITs and two directors of NITs in their ex-officio capacity as the present, preceding, and succeeding Chairpersons of JEE (Advance) and CSAB, respectively. On the contrary, all Central Universities, concerned with CUET, are represented solely by just the Vice Chancellor of JNU. State Universities and Institutes are not accorded representation in the NTA Governing Body and have therefore witnessed stagnant adoption of CUET amongst themselves.

Considering recent developments regarding NEET and UGC-NET, it is important to highlight that reforms are due in NTA, and passivity might result in a loss of trust in public examinations.

Conclusion

CUET is a public examination with a wide mandate, offering admission in a wide range of courses in a plethora of Universities – Central and State; Public and Private. Therefore, it also has its shortcomings and fallacies. We can conclude that CUET is a well-intended reform, yet clumsily implemented initiative. In a rapidly changing global economy, a well-groomed and skilful youth is a prerequisite for India to maintain pace with the world. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that the sanity and integrity of such public examinations are not compromised, and students can enjoy the widest possible range of options for education. In light of the recently formulated New Education Policy (NEP), 2020 it is expected that the examination infrastructure of India will also go through the required reforms soon.

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