
Examining Combined University Entrance Test (CUET) from the Lense of Teachers and Students

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Abstract

The paper highlights key aspects of CUET and analyses whether it addresses the challenges posed by the previous admission criteria in consonance with the goals of education. It explores challenges associated with standardised tests and implications on the federal structure of education and shifts in priorities and approaches to learning due to the signal effect of the CUET. Using the sample survey method, the paper presents challenges faced by students ranging from accessing information, preparing for the test to getting admissions in desired courses and colleges while the CUET was conducted for the first time in 2022. Contrary to the popular belief, it was found that, majority of the students did not use coaching to crack the test. The paper engages with faculty members to examines the impact of standardised and centralised tests in the midst of all existing inequities in education on the marginalised students in providing access to affordable quality education. The paper presents alternatives in the endeavour of a policy based on principles of fairness and equity.

Keywords:

Standardised tests;
Equity;
Admissions;
Centralisation;
Policy.

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1. Introduction

The higher education landscape in India is currently undergoing several changes at the structural level in accordance with the National Education Policy 2022 (NEP2020). The new policy proposes reforms at all levels—school, higher, and technical education with a focus on promoting multilingualism and holistic and multidisciplinary education with multiple entry and exit points. NEP 2020 envisions universalising education from preschool to the secondary level with a 100% gross enrolment ratio by 2030. It also targets to increase the GER in higher education to 50% by 2050. One of the significant changes introduced can be seen in the access to higher education itself, i.e., the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) to establish a unified standard for benchmarking candidates by adopting a single-entry point for admission to all undergraduate (UG) programs in all the Central Universities from 2022. Standardised testing for admissions is a burgeoning industry with computer-based assessment, instant scoring adaptive testing, and non-cognitive assessment (Atkinson, Geiser 2008).

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CUET is not a new concept. Earlier, Madhuri R Shah Committee 1984 had also recommended a common exam. Later, Central University Act of 2009 provided for the Central Universities Common Entrance Test (CUCET) but had not made it mandatory for all universities. 14 universities have adopted it so far. However, this time it has been made mandatory for all central universities. It has become the second largest entrance test after the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for engineering in India. CUET aims to ensure equal access for enrolment of students from various disciplines, examination boards, and regions nationwide.

With the CUET, students can exercise choice from various subjects through a single exam. These grades can be used for admission to several fields. Students are saved from the hassle of overlapping dates and different logistic issues. This initiative will enhance access to several Universities for an applicant with a single application, thus reducing the cost and increasing access. In consonance with NEP2020 commitment to multilingualism, CUET facilitates taking the test in 13 languages. The CUET will address the duplication challenges in major national-level entrance exams. The CUET aims to reduce hassles and provide for mid-entry admissions to allow people who missed the chance due to any challenge.

The CUET has been implemented to address the variation in marking patterns after Class XII th, by various State Boards thereby, creating an uneven selection ground. According to Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, applicants will not need coaching for this test as the CUET focuses on conceptual understanding and the capacity to apply knowledge. The policy aims to increase access, reduce financial difficulties, and especially support the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), particularly from rural and far-flung areas.

Even though the NEP2020 offers a common entrance test, it puts a caveat "with due regard to diversity and University autonomy". It is left up to individual universities and colleges to use NTA assessments for their admissions (Qamar,2022). Acknowledging the role of both central and state governments in the education sector, the UGC shall form a committee to consult with the various stakeholders to combine their opinions and suggestions to advance the proposal (Pradhan 2022).

CUET is touted to make a big difference by offering equal opportunities to students across the country for admission to the central universities without having to respond to the varied processes of different universities. These processes have made such institutes extremely popular but inaccessible to most students. CUET is poised to bridge this gap and equalise the acceptance rates of the various universities.

However, taking a closer look at the CUET raises some questions that need to be explored. CUET is based on the assumption that Class XII th scores are unreliable indicators because of differences in grading standards amongst various Boards. These uneven patterns push cut-offs to 99%, if not more, thereby putting many students to disadvantage. Therefore, a common standardised test should be used for admission purposes. There is a lot of research evidence against this assumption. Despite the variations in the assessment across different Boards marks, these marks are more representative of the student's performance. Several studies have confirmed that cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) in academic subjects in high school is the best overall predictor of student performance in college. A gist of studies, including those conducted by testing agencies can be seen in Burton and Ramist 2001 and Morgan 1989. The standardised test is based on a single day performance over 3-4 hours whereas a combination of the internal and external assessment in Boards will be based on a repeated sampling of student performance over the year. Even though there is a massive inflation of marks such grades should be more predictive of performance.

Coming up to the point of a competitive test is preceded by a trail of multiple activities involved in the preparation. Several factors like socio-economic background, parental support, language, and access to computers and related paraphernalia. These activities comprise what is

called "the educational arms race"- the unsparing competition for admission at highly selective institutions (Atkinson, 2001). This race dusts socio-economically weaker and marginalised students out of the competition but creates a space for questions about fairness and equity. The fundamental question that must be addressed is whether standardised admissions testing obstructs or furthers our educational purposes. The preparation for such exams starts much earlier and students tend to focus narrowly only on qualifying the test. However, other social skills get a hit in the process. The consequent question is whether the issue of high cut-offs is addressed by placing another common entrance test on the students. Will CUET become a tool for selection or elimination? The CUET leaning towards the CBSE curriculum, may put students from other Boards at a disadvantage and lead to additional burdens. On the other hand, it may also tend to centralise towards the CBSE at the cost of state boards.

Few experts have raised an apprehension that CUET may negatively impact the participation of women from minorities in higher education. According to Shabistan Ghaffar, a former member of the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI), minority institutes should have the autonomy to conduct admissions their way. With the UGC's decisions, the minority institutes will lose their distinct character (as quoted by Ismat Ara, 2022)

Besides the core issues, the students had to face severe infrastructural challenges related to server issues, paper download, and security protocol errors leading to the cancellation of the centres by the authorities. On the one hand, NTA blamed the technical glitches at the centres others blamed the NTA for inadequate preparation. The exam had to be rescheduled, adding to the woes of the students. CUET UG tested a unique combination of 54,000 subjects. A stable infrastructure is a must to carry out such massive exercises. Students should not have to face harassment while the agencies set up the test.

Having stated the debate around the CUET, it is critical to hear what learners and teachers have to say about this change. Our higher education system is awaiting reforms to bridge the class, caste, and gender gaps, and create opportunities for all to access and achieve. We need to study whether CUET will be the right solution. The present study attempts to pursue the following objectives:

1. To present and collate the experiences of students and the teachers who were instrumental in the conduct of CUET, in its introductory year.
2. To study whether the CUET can redress the challenges of the previous admission criteria in consonance with the goals of higher education.
3. To identify alternatives to the admission criteria at the UG level

2. Data and Methodology

To fulfill the above said objectives the following methodology has been used:

The sample survey method has been used to reach out to the students and teachers. Google Forms have been used to design two separate questionnaires on the following issues-The challenges students faced during various stages of the test from access to information-logistics to admission; exploring the time, money, and effort including coaching spent in the preparation; flexibility to choosing streams, and getting admission to their desired colleges; the level of convenience of accessing different universities through one test; issues pertaining to access to equal opportunities for applicants from diverse backgrounds and further the educational goals.

It also seeks their opinion on the criteria for admission. Besides some common questions, the tool for the teachers explores the implications of the CUET on the federal structure of education, and shifts in priorities and approaches to learning due to the signal effect of the CUET.

Participants include teachers teaching Ist year students and Students who have been selected through the CUET. The sample comprises 32 faculty members from different UG colleges from the University of Delhi. There are 331 students in all with 207 female and 124 male respondents. As the study aims to understand the impact of CUET on applicants from different socio-economic backgrounds student sample has fair representation under general, and reserved including EWS categories.

The validity of the questionnaires was assessed through a pilot study involving with an independent sample of four faculty members and sixteen learners from two colleges. The tools were also wetted by two subject experts. Necessary amendments were made based on the pilot survey and experts' feedback.

Purposive sampling has been adopted for data collection. The tools have closed-ended questions including the ones using 5 points Likert scale as well as open-ended ones. Internal consistency of Likert-style questions in the tools has been assessed using Cronbach's alpha (CA). It is a popular tool for assessing the reliability of questionnaires in survey-based methods. Alpha values of 0.70 and above are considered acceptable in research. The mean alpha value in the case of the students' questionnaire is 0.72 while the mean alpha value for the teachers' questionnaire is 0.81 as shown in Table 1. These values confirm the reliability of the tools.

The data has been analysed using a qualitative approach supported by quantitative analysis wherever necessary. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for the set of questions that were asked of students and teachers. The objective was to ascertain if there is a significant difference in student and teacher response to a particular issue. The ANOVA test was performed using the 5% level of significance. A probability value (P value) less than 0.5 implies a significant difference in students' and teachers' opinion. In contrast, a P value greater than or equal to 0.5 implies that there is no significant difference in student or teacher opinion relating to a particular issue. The study follows ethical standards of anonymity and confidentiality of respondents and their responses.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The challenges students faced ranged from accessing information about the test 11.5%; to interpreting relevant information 13.3%, and 12.5% of students found it difficult to fill and submit forms online. Even though the fees were not much the money spent on cybercafes to get help in filling out the forms was expensive. Several students did not have personal computers or access to it otherwise. This challenge was reported by most candidates from the EWS and a few from the reserved categories and also a few from the general category. 26% of the candidates faced challenges while taking the exam. These problems ranged from cancellation and shifting dates 23% of the students could not get into the desired colleges and 14% could not get into the desired programs. Because of the constant delay in the test, several parents and students panicked. Due to this lack of clarity, Seema's (pseudonym) parents got her admitted to a private college. Once the fees were paid, moving back was a deterrent. Several students like Seema ended up in private colleges where they never wanted to go. The students reported confusion right from filling in the forms, marking scheme, instructions needed to be easier to follow, normalisation of scores, and preference of subjects. The grievance system was tardy. All queries had to be emailed. Many students found the experience 'traumatising'. One student shared that despite getting good marks in the Boards she could not get into the college of choice because during the exam her computer system stopped working and she got nervous. Leaving crucial decisions of higher education to a one-day exam can have a devastating effect on the students.

With the announcement of CUET, it was felt that it is going to beef up the already booming coaching industry and again leave out the marginalised students. The coaching market was expecting a boom and the evidence of its readiness could be seen with posters and advertisements on social media and in every nook and corner.

However, data from the sample reveals quite the opposite. 89.1% of the students studied by themselves or were helped by their school for the test. They found the syllabus and mock tests displayed by NTA on the official website useful. The rest took coaching for preparing for the test. About 18% of the candidate spent more than 150 hours preparing for the test. About 61.5% of students spent up to 100 hours preparing for the test. As far as financial implications are concerned regarding money spent on preparation for the Test, 9.7% spent up to Rs.30,000 on coaching. Less than 1% of the sample spent more than Rs.30,000.

However, students with little access to the internet, and personal devices had a tough time preparing for the test. Almost all students experienced panic and anxiety during the entire admission process.

According to several reports in the Print, many coaching institutes that offered preparation for CUET had to shut shop due to low enrollments. Kalu Sarai hosts several coaching centres in the city. The owner of one of the institutes shared that most institutes teach subjects related to science, so last year they also set up coaching for CUET. Because of low recovery, they returned to their original subjects.

On the other hand, 74% of faculty members involved in the admission process feel that CUET saved time and effort as compared to earlier years. However, according to 45%, all seats still did not get filled on time. According to Dr.Cherry (pseudonym), CUET was introduced in haste. The chance of choosing a desired college was taken away from the student down the line of admission. A lot of students withdrew and all their effort got wasted. The admissions continued till September with almost 50% of the syllabus already covered. The students are having a tough time dealing with the gaps.56% of students and 52 % of teachers agree that the CUET gives them sufficient choice regarding subjects. P value of .649 also indicates the similarity in the opinions.

The Exams at the end of school for 13 million students are distributed among two all-India Boards- CBSE with 1.5 million students and ICSE catering to less than a lakh. The rest of the students are under different State Boards. Most of the students, 74%, found the NCERT syllabus to be very helpful in the preparation, and 32% of the respondents found the regional board syllabi helpful in attempting the test. CUET does not consider marks from different boards to reduce disparity among CBSE, ICSE, and state boards. According to data more students from CBSE found it easy to attempt the test. This may encourage alignment towards the NCERT curriculum at most schools at the cost of regional character. Regional boards tend to accommodate the needs of that region, especially in the Social Sciences. This may compromise regional sensibility and cultural understanding among students. Even though CUET claims to be mindful of these consequences, the apprehension remains.

According to the majority of students and faculty members, the relevance of the board exams has diminished significantly. A parent was confused about whether to send his son for coaching or tuition for Boards due to a lack of clarity. Sudha Acharya, Chairperson of the National Progressive Schools Conference (NPSC), which comprises 122 Delhi schools shared that parents have started to deprioritise school learning. She is getting requests from parents to withdraw their ward from the school as class 12th marks have very low weightage the parents would rather enroll the children into open schools and have them focus on CUET preparation. CUET is a computer-based test with objective-type multiple-choice questions. Students will tend to learn tricks and shortcuts to solve questions. The use of MCQs can be limiting in Social Sciences and Humanities where subjects involve reasoning and assessment of evidence but do not have a definitive and clear answer. This kind of testing is likely to promote narrowly focused learning. College admission criteria can have a

significant impact, positive or negative on schools-what Michael Kirst has called a “signaling effect” (Kirst and Venezia 2004).

The skewed focus on the ability to crack tough exams like JEE can shadow time to learn other critical skills which are not measured in the test of focus as against an in-depth engagement with the subjects. The signaling effect can have far-reaching consequences on schools. Unfortunately, the success of schools is measured by the number of students who crack these Tests. Teaching to the test is an important survival practice used by schools.

Uneven marking and mark inflation are seen as a response to artificially help students to get access to the best colleges. Over the years there has not been a proportionate increase in the number of seats in the Colleges as the increase of the numbers who complete class XIIth. So creating more seats, courses, and Universities could be an answer to address the problem in an equitable manner. However, this is an expensive option for the Governments at the center and state levels. One of the respondents observes that CUET narrows the scope of access to higher education. This process shifts the onus to students from the government to provide accessible and affordable quality education for all.

The data reveals interesting observations on the issue of fairness and inclusiveness of CUET. Only 42% of the students and 48% of the faculty members feel that the CUET is fair. Students from economically weaker sections and especially those from rural areas struggled as everything was online. A few students are relieved that they escaped the Board's marks as they could have never scored enough to crack the best colleges. However, a centralised test in the midst of all existing inequities in education will continue to push out students from rural and marginalised backgrounds.

The qualitative analysis of the data is supported by quantitative analysis using ANOVA for questions that are common in teacher and student questionnaires as shown in Table 2. There is no significant difference in the responses of teachers and students for most of the issues. However, their opinions significantly differ with respect to one aspect related to the adequacy of NCERT syllabi to prepare for CUET where students agree to a large extent and teachers do not agree. These findings are fairly consistent with the interpretations and hence lend support to qualitative analysis

The core issue remains whether the CUET resolves problems with the earlier criteria namely over marking leading to high cut-offs in the Colleges. 64% of students feel that the CUET has fixed this aspect of Boards doling out almost full marks 52% of the students and 45% of teachers believe that CUET provides affordable quality education. 54% of teachers feel that CUET has been able to address problems of earlier criteria to a small extent only and they do not agree with the current admission criteria. The majority of teachers are not able to observe a distinct difference in the students who have come through the CUET as compared to the ones selected by the earlier criteria.

Admissions to higher education through a single test will lead to centralisation of the assessment and learning by one agency. This may lead to a common curriculum. A common curriculum cannot preserve the rich diversity and uniqueness of our country. Even though different state boards are allowed to continue and follow their respective curricula and examinations, they would become redundant without any weightage to those marks in undergraduate admissions. Tilt toward centralisation may undermine the federal structure of education. It may make the structure rigid and impede organic development while responding to evolving contexts and experiences in the country (Rajalakshmi, 2022).

4. Conclusions

Respondents, students, and teachers from the study have come up with suggestions for the admission criteria. Considering the challenges that students faced with severe consequences for their access to higher education, several teachers suggested that the UGC could have announced a common test on smaller departments across Universities or some Universities to identify the problems and create solutions rather than to experiment en-mass.

Two faculty members have pointed out that higher education should not be rationed in our country. A developing country like ours can benefit from more young people prepared for a better citizenry, knowledge, and skills. Aspiring students should be given more choices and be empowered to use the same. Given the extremely low enrolment rates into higher education, it is even more critical that the policies should be inclusive and that the infrastructure should support the same principle. The total public investment in education by both the Centre and State governments has not grown in proportion with the enrollment growth over the last several years. This has led to the creation of scarcity and to ever-spiraling merit lists. The marginalised students will continue to be at a disadvantage, and the social order will be reproduced. An admission policy should not only be based on clear principles but also be able to show it.

In India, education is a joint responsibility of States and Center. With CUET it could tilt the onus towards the Center leading to top-down governance and micromanagement, thereby compromising autonomy and democratic division of power. However well-designed, a single test can never be appropriate for a country with a history of democracy, federalism, and local participation.

Several students and teachers have suggested that the Board scores should be given due weightage in the criteria. If the focus is on mastery of curriculum content, then the real preparation would be classroom participation. Several kinds of talents, and leadership, community service must find a place in the admission criteria. Teachers worry that so much weightage on a common exam may alter the nature of learning to fragmented and based on test-taking skills. Board marks will be used as a tiebreaker to select candidates who have performed at the same level in the current criteria. This does not seem to be a reliable method as the variation of marks is very narrow.

Another suggestion points to the use of methods to achieve parity amongst different Boards regularly. This idea sounds extremely difficult but can be very inclusive and organic. The criteria based on factors known at the point of admission as a tool for prediction are minimal. Best models based on a combination of school grades and academic and socio-economic factors still account for only 25-30% of the variance in outcome measures like college GPA. The rest of the variance is unexplained (Atkinson & Geiser 2008). Several factors like financial and social support, different pedagogy, and engagement in the college can have a positive impact on outcomes. The CUET should not become another tool to sift those who can pass from the others. Its intent and the inherent constructs and broader values should be clear.

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Table 1: Test of reliability of Questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha

Sl.No	Item	Mean Cronbach's alpha
1	Teachers' Response	0.81
2	Students' Response	0.72

Table 2: Results of Analysis of variance (ANOVA) test (Significant at 5% level) (* figures show significance)

Sl. No	Items	<i>p</i> -values
1	Q: If a student has not studied a subject at school but wants to pursue it at an Undergraduate level. Does CUET ease the change of streams?	0.649
2	Q: Do the NCERT syllabi prepare students for the skill set sought by CUET?	0.000*
3	Q: Do the Regional/State Boards prepare for the skill set sought by CUET?	0.569
4	Q: Does CUET distance school education from UG education?	0.832
5	Q: How relevant are the Board Exams in the current scenario?	0.181
6	Q: Has CUET made the admission process smooth?	0.157
7	Q: Has CUET made the admission process fair?	0.179
8	Q: Does CUET facilitate access to affordable quality education for all?	0.897
9	Q: Can CUET empower students coming from rural/marginalised, non-English speaking backgrounds?	0.231