

Compulsory entrance exam: What'll happen to education for all?



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Manish R. Joshi, secretary, University Grants Commission, wrote to the Vice-Chancellors of Central, State and deemed universities on Feb.16, 2023, saying that admissions to undergraduate and post-graduate courses must be made, based on the students' performance in the Central University Entrance Test (CUET).

Earlier the CUET was left to the choice of universities. Now it has been made compulsory for admissions to 1,113 universities and 47,000 colleges across the country. It is noteworthy that the New Education Policy-2020 insists on conducting common entrance exams for all educational admissions.

Purpose will be defeated

All students who complete schooling must be given opportunities to pursue higher education which must be employment-oriented. This is the very purpose of education which the Radhakrishnan Commission, the Kothari Commission and the national education

policies drawn up in 1986, 1992 and 2020 have been unanimous on.

Besides, the new education policy-2020 intends to raise the students' Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) from the present 24 per cent to 50 per cent by 2030. On the contrary, the compulsory entrance exam system will not help achieve the target and in fact, will affect the students' enrolment. Particularly, higher education will become something like a mirage for the first-generation students and the SC, ST and rural students if they are forced to take the entrance exam.

The number of students pursuing higher education touched for the first time four crore in 2020-21. Compared to 2019-20, the students pursuing higher education through the distance education system recorded a seven per cent increase in 2020-21. Those who cannot afford the hefty college fees, are unemployed and can pursue education only part-time opt for distance education system. It is ironic that these students too have to take the entrance exam.

TN at forefront

Tamil Nadu has earned the distinction of achieving the GER rate of 52 per cent in higher education. Girl students pursuing higher education are incentivized with an aid of Rs.1000 a month. Government scholarships are offered to the first-generation students. Moreover, the undergraduate students in the government colleges are totally exempted from paying fees. All these measures have helped the state record higher GER rate in higher education. Under these circumstances, introduction of a common entrance exam for higher education is hardly a right move.

Adverse effects

If the CUET is made mandatory and compulsory, it will trigger a mushrooming growth of coaching centres all over the country.

Only the students from the affluent sections of the society can afford training at the coaching centres for taking the entrance exam. The students from the less privileged sections may borrow heavily for joining these centres while several will keep off these centres. Those who are unable to crack the entrance test will be kept away from the colleges and universities and will feel dejected. In the long run, the society may have to meet with adverse consequences.

Since an entrance exam pass is the ticket to the portals of higher education, students who set their sights on the entrance test will not focus on their customary class 10 and 12 public exams. Thus, they may not be serious about acquiring basic knowledge in their subjects.

The expenditure for universities' education and research schemes is met from the revenue earned from the fees paid by the students, particularly those in the distance education system. About 45 per cent of the universities, hamstrung as they are by funds crunch, are already struggling to pay their employees' salaries and pension. When the students' enrolment becomes less, the financial condition of the universities will turn worse.

At present 95 per cent of students in universities and colleges in Tamil Nadu belong to the state. If admissions are made through the CUET, the enrolment of other state students in the TN institutions will increase.

Today lakhs of highly educated students from the rural and poor background and first-generation graduates have become economically better off, working in various fields including the information and communication technology in the country and abroad. Thanks to their foreign earnings, the country's forex position has comfortably become better than ever before. But if the common entrance test is made compulsory, the enrolment of students from the less privileged sections will decrease and as a result, today's comfortable situation will get reversed.

Reservation is being implemented in higher education admissions in the country, particularly in Tamil Nadu on the basis of social justice. But the CUET will shatter this paradigm.

Resolutions against the New Education Policy have been passed in the Assemblies of Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Telangana and Kerala. Similarly, the CUET will set off a backlash in the states. As a result, the number of states taking up arms against the new education policy is bound to increase.

Solutions

At present the government and private universities themselves are conducting entrance exams to admit students. The UGC can formulate guidelines on these entrance tests and monitor the way they are conducted so that the admission process is transparent and scrupulous.

The best teachers can mould the students into the educationally advanced regardless of the students' natural state of intellect. But the catch is that because of malpractices in appointment of university and college teachers, the bona fide teachers, skilled and knowledgeable, fall by the wayside, watching helplessly the influential but less talented teachers getting appointed. This is the basic defect of our higher education system.

A board at the national or state level can be created to recruit the best university and college teachers by conducting exams and interviews helmed by experts. The best teachers can surely enhance the standard of higher education.

So, instead of conducting common entrance test for students, it is better to conduct such tests for teachers. That will be a good move welcomed by parents, students and all stake-holders.

Translated by V. Mariappan.