

SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF EXAMINATION REFORMS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Education has all along been and continues to be an amalgam of teaching and testing enterprises. Testing is mainly done through 'continuous evaluation' or a 'fixed point examination'. Examinations acted as motivators and stimulators for both the teachers and scholars, but over a period of time they have become indispensable and have dominated the system in India. Instead of becoming the means to provide the right type of education, they have become an end in themselves, with the job seekers devising ways of obtaining certificate without putting in hard work. Therefore, any move for a change in curriculum, teaching methods and evaluation practices are met with resistance. Our present examination system is a legacy of the colonial rule where importance is being placed on passing examinations and acquiring status, while practical training for life and work is ignored. That we need to assess the child is unquestionable and that students should be able to express and explain what they have learnt is indisputable but the question is how useful are examinations anyway? Does the current assessment system provide the necessary space for learning? With these considerations, the issue of examination reforms has become a matter of serious discussion in the academic circles and amongst the policy makers. Over the past many years, the University Grants Commission and the Ministry of Human Resource Development has introduced many examination reforms to (i) undo the dominance of conventional examination pattern and; (ii) improve the quality of examination with a view to making them valid and reliable. There is a strong case for introducing and implementing examination reforms earnestly. The present paper attempts to throw light on the significant aspects of examination reforms in the higher education system. The paper gives an account of the key concerns of the examination system in higher education in India highlighting its drawbacks and lists the reforms introduced in the examination system. The last section includes recommendations for successful implementation of these reforms.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian higher education sector is in the midst of tremendous growth and change. The population demographic has created an unprecedented number of young people in this country. Education had been a subject of national debate and the political push by the Human Resource Development (HRD) minister, Mr. Kapil Sibal has given further impetus to the debate on the need for reform in the Indian education system.

The present system of education is a legacy of the British rule in India. It is altogether unsuited to the needs of independent India. Even after the attainment of independence no significant changes have been brought about in the structure and content of education system. Examinations have to be related to the goals of education. These goals are to enable the students to acquire the capacity to learn new facts, to understand and comprehend them, and to develop the capability to apply these facts to obtain more and more knowledge, to develop the capacity to analyze problems and to synthesize knowledge and acquire the maneuverability to face new situations confidently which our systems do not test. It is, therefore, necessary to redesign our examination system to make it more relevant to the goals of education and the needs of our present day society.

The system of imparting higher education should be such that after completing education in college, the youth should not be dependent solely on service, but must be able to start some independent small scale industry or business on their own. Vocationalisation of education is the need of the hour. More and more technical and vocational institutions need to be started where training modules in practical aspects of career must be compulsory. Every effort should be made to inspire the students with noble and innovative ideas. It should be compulsory for students to appear in psychological tests. This will enable the students to choose subjects and careers of their own choice. In this way, the students can plan their careers from the very beginning. Just after their schooling, they would be able to decide the career which they wish or are interested in pursuing.

An examination is a means to assess the progress made by the students in the subjects taught to them. In the routine day-to-day teaching process, an examination seems to be an innocent affair, but troubles start when an

examination turns from normal revision exercise to formal or rigid exercise of selection and promotion. The student community considers examinations as an unwelcome ordeal to be gone through. That apart, the system of examination itself suffers from many serious shortcomings.

Examinations have specific objectives. They are means to evaluate the performance and judge the academic achievements of students. Such evaluation on the one hand helps the students to adjust their learning programmes accordingly and on the other hand helps the teacher to adjust his teaching programme according to the requirement of the examination. It also provides some motivation for hard and continuous work by the students and for continuous improvement of teaching by the teacher. It is on the basis of the divisions or grades awarded to the students after evaluating their merit and ability that they are allowed or refused admission to institutions of higher learning. These grades are generally a pre-condition for entry into competitive examinations for public employment.

Examinations are held by universities at various levels:

- Entrance exams test potential candidates on minimum acceptable standards for entry to courses.
- In-course (internal) exams help students understand the need for further guidance, improvement and feedback.
- End-course (final) exams are final verdicts of student performance, to determine the knowledge, skills and abilities imbibed by the student from the course.

There is a general view, and rightly so, that the traditional examination system does not bring out the real ability, achievement or potentiality of students. Hence, there is a need for examination reform. Before delving into this aspect, let us look at the history of examinations in Indian Higher Education System.

EXAMINATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION - A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

With the establishment of the Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay in 1857, effectiveness of examinations, the purposes they serve, and their relevance came under review. Even the earliest of the reviews of education in India, dating from 1886, pointed out that the university entrance examination 'matriculation' stimulated the holding of at least six external examinations extending down to the lower primary stages. A very high frequency of examinations in the education scenario has been a concern since long. Evn the

Hunter Commission (1882) stated that: 'It is beyond doubt that the greatest evil from which the system of Indian university education suffers is that teaching is subordinated to examination and not examination to teaching.' The shortcomings in the examinations system were also identified by the Calcutta University Commission (1917-19) and it specifically indicated its unhappiness about alternative questions, the mechanical system of marking, grace marks, frequency of examinations, etc.

Boards of Secondary Education were established in the states to conduct external examinations at the school-leaving stage after the transfer of administrative responsibility for education from the British to the Indian Ministers in 1921-22. The Hartog Committee Report (1929) criticized the academic bias of examinations at the school level which continued to be geared to the needs of university entrance and provided no opportunities for the majority of students to take up industrial, commercial, or technical courses as a preparation for life. Further the emergence of provincial autonomy in 1935 brought all the stages of education under the effective control of Indians themselves.

After independence, 'Education' became the responsibility of the states and the Central Government coordinated the technical and higher education by specifying the standards. The problem of ensuring better integration of education with other spheres of human activity has been a cause of concern. Educationists and policy makers felt that there is a virtual generation gap in education and that there are barriers in the educational system. Others were of the view that the crisis has also been caused by such faults in the system as the question-answer emphasis to show examination results. It would not be out of place to mention here that the Radhakrishnan Commission on Education (1948) stated that the most important single reform in our educational system that it could suggest was the reform in the examination system. The crippling effect of external examinations showed that the reform had become crucial to all progress and had to go hand in hand with improvement in teaching as mentioned by the Kothari Commission on Education (1964-66). Later in 1976, education became a joint responsibility of both the state and the Centre through a constitutional amendment. The Central Government through the Ministry of Human Resource Development's Department of Education and the governments at the states formulated the education policy and planning.

National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 and revised PoA 1992 envisioned that free and compulsory education should be provided for all children up to 14 years of age before the commencement of 21st century. The NPE 1986 postulated that the examination system should be recast so as to ensure a method of assessment that is a valid and reliable measure of student development and a powerful instrument for improving teaching and learning. Whether we need the present form of examination or we need some other forms of examination is an issue which calls for an immediate debate.

II

KEY CONCERNS IN HIGHER EDUCATION EXAMINATION SYSTEM

The problems that have contributed to the crisis in education are countless. Quite relevant to the crisis in education are the questions of the curricula, the syllabi and the much criticised system of examinations, which some people describe as the bane of the system in this country. Some of the key issues related to examination system in India are discussed in this section.

Creation of Fear & Tension

When examinations determine a child's advancement through school and his later life's opportunities, parents understandably put pressure to ensure that their child succeeds. The examinations create psychological fear and tensions amongst the students. Under duress, the students resort to all kinds of malpractices to pass the examination. On the other hand, the teachers also teach what will be examined rather than focusing on teaching for life.

Emphasis on Cramming or Memorisation

The practice of asking questions which demand only the recall of information rather than higher mental level operations has resulted in over emphasis on cramming or memorisation. As a consequence there is a noticeable tardiness in the development of higher mental abilities. To check this, the open-book examination system has been recommended by some educationists. The open-book examinations are specially designed to test the qualities of comprehension and capability of synthesis for which new types of questions need to be set. This system is claimed to eliminate the habit of unintelligent memorisation by students and also to minimise the evil of copying in the examinations. However, with the present essay-type question papers, students cannot be allowed to consult books.

Scholarship Oriented Nature

The present system lays emphasis on the growth and development of scholastic aspects while the non-scholastic aspects are almost ignored. This results in frustrating the efforts of bringing about all round development of the students.

Fixed Point Examination vis-à-vis Comprehensive Continuous Assessment

The students are subjected to three-hour testing based on a limited course content. Not only this, their sustained efforts of so many years are evaluated by the examiners in a short span of a few minutes. This raises a question mark on the entire system of examination because it does not take into account the work done throughout the years in terms of projects, assignments, tests and class work, etc.

External versus Internal examination

The system of external examination is alleged to encourage selective study and cramming, use of made-easy notes and to discourage the habit of regular work, use of good text books and innovations. The students do not take the regular class work seriously. Their total attention is fixed on the final examination. The gravest charge against the external examinations is that instead of serving as a useful aid to improve the quality and standard of education and teaching, education itself becomes subservient to examinations. External examinations are more objective and less prone to local influences or external pressures. For this reason, though academically more unsound than the internal assessment system, they are preferred and advocated by certain educationists. Any new scheme that combines the merits of internal as well as external examinations would best serve the purpose.

Subject wise Gradation vis-à-vis overall grade

Another concern is that the students should not be given only an overall grade but should be given subject-wise grades. Only subject-wise gradation can be considered a true assessment of a student's calibre. Such a system would enable the teacher to know the exact level of achievement of a student in various subjects and disciplines which would improve their employability. It has also been suggested that successful students may be permitted to improve their divisions and grades by reappearing in a particular subject.

Reforming Course Curriculum

In the last few years, much debate has taken place with respect to reforming course curriculum and learning pedagogy. There is a greater emphasis on raising current standards to make the curriculum more relevant to professional requirements, and in line with international norms. The growth of private sector educational institutions and universities has helped improve supply, in terms of the number of seats available. However, these have also worsened the quality problem. Not only is there wide variance in the quality of graduates from different institutions, there are too many with unacceptably low standards both in the government and private sectors.

Curriculum Flexibility and Student Mobility

Students should be allowed to appear in the examinations by bits or in instalments. They may appear in some papers or subjects in one particular year and may complete the rest or another few papers or subjects in the subsequent year or years. They may get the degree, diploma or comprehensive certificate after having qualified in the minimum number of subjects or papers.

MIS-MANAGEMENT OF EXAMINATIONS

We often come across the startling news about the leakage of question paper, mishandling of answers scripts, mismatch of roll number, errors in marking and totaling, awarding of grace marks, wrong declaration of results and many more. Most of the examining agencies still appear to be "technology-shy" and are hesitant in adopting the latest techniques of computerisation and optical scanning.

There exist a lot of quality problems in the prevailing system, including:

Quality of Question papers

Quality of term-work assessment

Holding of fair practical examinations

Exam Schedules

Management of Malpractices in Examinations

Question paper leakages

Student cheating/impersonation

Quality of Answer Script Evaluation

Shortage of qualified examiners

Delays in paper correction

Discrepancies in handling of transcripts

Manipulation of scores

Award of Grace Marks

Delays in results processing and declaration

Handling of re-evaluations

Quality of Question Paper

The question paper is the most vital component of any examination system. Very often the papers are not set with sufficient care. It is necessary that the setter should be given a clear cut policy statement for a particular paper, which must specifically indicate the areas of abilities sought to be tested with inter se proportions, the value of each major unit in terms of marks for setting questions, the different types of questions to be included in the paper and the proportion of marks allotted to them.

Objective Questions: When formulating an objective type question paper, the preparation of the scoring key and marking scheme requires more attention in order to reduce the element of subjectivity in marking the script. The questions must be pointed and unambiguously clear. The misleading answers should be chosen with great care.

Essay Type Questions and Subjectivity of Marking : The examination does not remain a valid measure of student achievement because essay type questions lead to limited sampling of the course content and prompts the students to do selective study. There is a lot of inter-examiner and intra-examiner variability in marking and as a result of that the reliability of the examination suffers.

Quality of Answer script Evaluation

Manipulation of Scores: The marks secured by candidate in an examination do not truly reflect the acquisition of ability because they suffer from lot of errors some of which are identifiable and many more which are unidentifiable. This does not allow us to ensure the comparison of scores within the subject and across the subject.

Numerical Marking System Vs. Grading : The current practice of awarding numerical marks suffers from lot of discrepancies caused because of variety of errors. Besides, spread of scores in different subjects being different further compounds the problem. In view of this numerical marking does not give right

picture as it gives unrealistic assessment of human potential. This can be overcome if the students are placed in an ability band which represents a range of marks.

Awarding of Grace Marks : The awarding of grace marks is not based on any scientific rationale. In almost all the cases they are arbitrary, unscientific, adhoc and comic. The practice currently followed is not to consider the passing probabilities for deciding the award of grace marks.

Re-evaluation

It is the right of every student to be evaluated as accurately as possible. With a view to ensuring objectivity and transparency, most of the universities and boards prepare and supply the detailed marking scheme for the guidance of the examiners. If the answer scripts are marked conscientiously and the Boards ensure the adherence of the examiners to the marking scheme, the need for re-evaluation should not arise. However, in some cases lapses may occur and the request for re- evaluation of those students should be acceded to not only to provide for natural justice but to make it all the more transparent and tangible. In this, it may be understood that the re-evaluation is not to be confused with retotalling. It is reassessment of the answer script.

Returning of Marked Answer Scripts

There has been an appreciable movement in the direction of returning the marked answer script to the examinees in the interest of accountability, credibility and transparency in evaluation process. The greatest dilemma is whether such a scheme would be administratively feasible especially in the Boards/ Universities which handle and process the results of hundreds of thousands of students.

III

SIGNIFICANT EXAMINATION REFORMS

For promotion of quality and excellence in higher education, the University Grants Commission (UGC) developed an 'Action Plan for Academic and Administrative Reforms' to outline the main steps, the central and state universities, colleges and other educational institutions of higher education need to consider and adopt in respect of

Curriculum development

Semester system,

Choice-based credit system

Admission procedures

Examination reforms

The new grant making policy developed by UGC as part of the 11th Plan strategy for improving the quality of higher education involved linking of grant making process with adoption of academic and administrative reforms by the concerned universities and colleges. Therefore the educational institutions were expected to initiate this academic reform at the earliest. Some of these initiatives concerned with examination reforms are as under:

Curriculum Development and Streamlining Examinations

Continuous updating and revision of curricula is something which must be deeply ingrained in the academic culture of a university. Each individual university must ensure that the curricula development exercise leading to major revision in course contents and curricula is taken up every three years. Uniform academic calendar across all institutions of higher education has already been urged upon by the UGC. Universities need to streamline their examination process such that the results are declared in a timebound manner and no student suffers in his/her career mobility and academic progression due to delays in declaration of results and issue of mark sheet.

Introduction of the Semester System

Annual examination with emphasis on external written examination needs to be reformed. We can make a beginning by introducing Semester system. Similarly we have to gradually move to a system which emphasises on continuous internal assessment and reduces the written examination component to a reasonable level. Duration of the semester, number of contact hours per paper, per semester and relative weightage of continuous internal assessment and semester-end examination needs to be prescribed unambiguously. The greatest advantage of this system is that it reduces the load of the students and inculcates regular study habits in time. Since the academic year is divided into two semesters, it also has the advantage of providing upward mobility; the students can clear the backlog even after moving to the next semester. It also enables the students to learn at their own pace. There need be no doubt that the type of education that concerns itself only with the study of a prescribed set of books and annual or term examinations in the traditional manner, or in the semester system, is not only

incomplete, but also wasteful and a failure.

Introduction of Internal Assessment

The fixed one point written examination is not an effective measure for gauging all the abilities nor does it promote the application of multiple techniques of assessment. The scheme of Comprehensive Continuous Examination (CCE) is inspired by the age-old adage that it is the teacher who knows the pupil best, and it is through this teacher that we would get to know how the learner is progressing with reference to his own earlier achievements, with reference to his peer group as also with reference to the expected levels of attainments set by the teacher.

Curriculum Flexibility and Student Mobility

Curricular flexibility and students' mobility is another issue that warrants our urgent attention. These can be addressed by introducing credit based courses and credit accumulation. In order to provide with some degree of flexibility to students, we need to provide for course duration in terms of credit hours and also a minimum as well as a maximum permissible span of time in which a course can be completed by a student.

Treating Public Examination Optional

The credibility of terminal examination is under question and they are used only for purposes of certification and promotion. As a consequence, the institutions of higher and professional learning started conducting their entrance examinations. The ultimate victim is the student, who ever since his entry into schooling, is constantly subjected to an examination galore. He suffers from the examination syndrome all through his education career. In view of the above, there is a need to debate on the significance of the public examination being made optional.

A Common National Test for Institutions of Higher and Professional Learning

Multiple entrance tests for a student passing class XII for admission to institutions of higher and professional learning not only results in financial burden on the parents but also turns the student into a nervous wreck. Examinations have no emotions. This prompts us to do some loud thinking for replacing separate entrance examinations by a common national test.

Grading System

We also need to move away from marks and division system in evaluation and need to introduce Grading system – preferably on a 9 point scale and Cumulative Grade Point Score (CPGS) in order to make our evaluation system at par with the best practices in the rest of the world.

Development of Question Banks

If quality questions of different types are generated, measuring various objectives of varying difficulty levels, the quality of question papers will improve. For this question banks need to be developed in each curricular areas for all stages of education. These question banks should be made accessible to the teachers who can use them for making various tests and also to students who can use them for their own drill and practice.

Implementation of Multiple Sets of Question Paper

The CBSE introduced multiple sets of question paper in the year 1992. The wisdom of this move has been questioned by the cross-section of the society because it has led to many apprehensions in the minds of the examinees in particular and the society in general. This experiment was in conformity with the recommendations of the Madan Mohan Committee. However, it is important to compare the parallelism of the multiple sets of question papers.

Online Examination Module and Use of IT in Examination Management

With steadily rising enrollment numbers and new courses being introduced each year, the number of entrance and other exams conducted is expected to grow substantially in the coming years. Indian educational institutes spend much time, money and effort to manage these exams, which are as yet being conducted through traditional paper and pen methods with manual evaluations. Online examination module can be introduced.

IV

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Indian higher education landscape is changing rapidly. Demographic bulge, expanding school education and rising aspirations has put considerable pressure for expansion of higher education. There are greater expectations from higher education due to the country's rapid economic growth. Every now and then, the country's leaders, including educationists of various hues and disciplines, talk of the deficiencies of the present system, and plead for reforms. No wonder, there has been a plethora of education reform committees

and commissions. There has also been considerable experimentation in the processes of education, but the basic problem of fitting the system to the real needs of the country and its people has remained unsolved.

The aforesaid reforms, if introduced in isolation, might not produce desired results as they are inter linked. They need to be implemented simultaneously and the changes that they are supposed to bring about will be very gradual and imperceptible but in the long run these will help in improving the learners' achievement and thereby promote the development of human resource. Not only all this, they will also go a long way in promoting the teachers' potential and institutions' capabilities and thus will have a 'far reaching effect on the quality of education in the country.

Examination Reform Package

The question of examination reform should be construed as a package of all the following factors:

Introduction of semester system.

Continuous internal evaluation;

Teachers playing the key role

Student Mobility and Curriculum Development with scope for flexibility

Subject gradation rather than overall gradation

Improving the efficiency of Examination Bureaucracy

It is this package as a whole which should be brought about to improve the higher education pattern and not in a piecemeal fashion.

Improvement in the Role of the Teacher

The teachers themselves might not be prepared to accept the onerous responsibilities going with examination reforms. It is natural that any attempt at reforms for the purpose of changing the status-quo means resistance from the established order. However, the call for examination reforms on the part of experts over the years is having been very consistent and several States and universities already having taken up examination reforms in fact, though in a piecemeal way, there is undoubtedly need for orderly progress towards examination reforms in terms of the above package. Implementation of this package however bristles with several practical problems, diversities in the educational system in the country being vast.

Need for an Examination Reforms Commission

'An Examination Reforms Commission should be set up as a permanent body to facilitate monitoring of progress in examination reforms from time to time until the task is fulfilled in stages. The terms of reference for this Commission may be:

- i) Review of the status of examination reforms from time to time.
- ii) Phasing of examination reforms, indicating timeframe within which, and levels at which, the reforms are to be effected.
- iii) Introduction of fair and objective systems of grading/scaling.
- iv) Laying down norms for continuous comprehensive internal evaluation and suggesting safeguards against abuse of this evaluation system.
- v) Advising on minimum levels of learning to go with internal evaluation system.
- vi) Laying down modalities for semesterisation and modularisation.
- vii) Advising on inter-institutional linkages to secure comparable standards.
- viii) Teacher orientation for successful implementation of examination reforms.

It is obvious that the Examination Reforms Commission will have to go into problems relating to the reforms in each State, fully involving the State level authorities such that problems at the State as well as the sub-State levels are fully taken into consideration' (GOI, NPE 1986). Functionaries of UGC, AIU, AICTE, NCERT, NIEPA, State resource institutions, State Boards of Education and other expert bodies at the national and other levels, apart from teacher and student organisations will also have to be consulted from time to time by the Commission.

Focus on Nation Building through Education

For more success in higher education, it is required that instead of lengthy examinations at a stretch, the due importance should be given to intelligence tests, personal interview and class room works at regular intervals. The development of clean character towards prosperity of nation is another important aim of higher education. The aspects of these higher studies must develop lessons of national integration as well as international integration and unity more effectively.

Free Use of Libraries, Laboratories and Internet as tools of Knowledge Enhancement

A great stress needs to be given for establishing good libraries in our colleges and universities. Students should be encouraged to make free use of them under the able guidance of teachers free of cost. More discussions and arguments on varied topics can impart more knowledge and information than more lecturing and completing the course. Equally important are the laboratories with latest equipments and items. To test the learning of books, students need to have good laboratories. An experiment is an unending quest of learning and knowledge on a permanent basis. The institutions providing higher education should be made temples of the modern age.

In the true spirit of the motto "Experiment and innovate or perish", we must try to experiment and innovate and learn from them and finally reform our system of examination. Any rigid attitude will result in total waste of our efforts to rid our examination system of the existing evils.

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