

The net result will be poor doctoral research



Amit Mitra

Research Associate at the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi

Using National Eligibility Test (NET) scores as the sole criterion for PhD admissions in India is a

step backwards

The use of the National Eligibility Test (NET) as a primary criterion for PhD admissions in India has sparked significant debate within the academic community. Traditionally, the NET has served as a qualifying examination for Junior Research Fellowships (JRF) and in determining eligibility for assistant professorships. However, its growing role in determining PhD admissions raises hard questions about its efficacy in identifying true research

potential. The nature of the test, which is entirely multiple-choice question based (MCQs), predominantly assesses lower-order cognitive abilities such as memory and recall. This approach, while useful in certain contexts, falls short in evaluating the critical thinking and analytical skills essential for successful doctoral research.

PhD research demands a deep engagement with complex ideas, the ability to critique existing knowledge, and the creativity to contribute to original research. These skills, crucial for academic success, are largely overlooked in the NET's current format. In disciplines such as literature, social sciences and the humanities, where interpretation and analysis are key, the emphasis on factual recall through MCQs reduces intricate subject matter to trivial questions. For instance, asking candidates to identify specific details from literary texts or historical events does little to gauge their ability to engage with broader theoretical concepts or develop nuanced arguments.

Disadvantage for marginalised communities

The consequences of this approach are particularly pronounced for students from marginalised communities. As reported by this daily, the reliance on NET scores disproportionately disadvantages these students, who often face greater barriers in accessing the resources needed to prepare for such examinations. The high cost of coaching, which has become almost essential for passing the NET, exacerbates this inequality. As a result, many talented students from these backgrounds may be excluded from pursuing PhD programmes — not because of a lack of intellectual capability but because of systemic barriers that the current admissions process fails to address.

Will affect institutional autonomy

The centralisation of PhD admissions through the NET poses a significant threat to the autonomy of higher educational institutions, which have traditionally played a pivotal role in selecting candidates based on unique criteria such as research proposals, interviews, and discipline-specific tests. This one-size-fits-all approach undermines the diversity and innovation that are essential to academic research. The autonomy of universities to shape their research programmes and recruit candidates who align with specific institutional and disciplinary needs is crucial in maintaining the integrity and the quality of higher education in India.

This concern is not merely theoretical. Recent experiences with centralisation, such as the introduction of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for undergraduate admissions, have already sparked fears about the erosion of institutional autonomy. The new directive takes this centralising approach further, diminishing the role of universities in shaping their research programmes and faculty recruitment. Critics argue that such centralisation could lead to a homogenisation of academic standards, thereby stifling the innovation and the diversity that are the lifeblood of scholarly research.

The current system, by laying emphasis on such a limited range of skills, fails to prepare students for the demands of doctoral research. PhD candidates are expected to contribute original insights to their fields, publish in peer-reviewed journals, and engage in scholarly discourse. These tasks require not only subject knowledge but also strong analytical abilities, creativity, and effective communication skills. The NET, however, does little to foster these competencies, instead encouraging rote learning and a superficial engagement with the subject.

As India aspires to become a global leader in education and research, it is worth considering why so many students are increasingly opting to pursue PhDs abroad. The exodus of bright minds to foreign institutions can be seen as a response to the limitations of the domestic system, where the emphasis on standardised testing such as the NET may stifle the creativity and the critical thinking that are nurtured in more holistic and flexible admission processes elsewhere. If the current trend continues, with a rigid, centralised approach to PhD admissions, we may see even more students seeking opportunities overseas — where their research potential is evaluated more comprehensively, and where academic environments are more conducive to fostering innovation and diversity in scholarship.

A narrowing of inquiry

Further, the growing reliance on NET scores as the primary criterion for PhD admissions could inadvertently narrow the scope of research in India. Research thrives on diversity — of thought, methodology, and perspective. By funnelling all PhD aspirants through a standardised test that values rote memorisation over critical thinking, we risk cultivating a generation of scholars more adept at passing examinations than at pushing the boundaries of knowledge. This narrowing of academic inquiry threatens to limit the development of original ideas and innovative research that are critical for progress in any field of study.

The challenge, then, is not merely to select candidates who can excel in standardised tests, but to cultivate a system that recognises and nurtures the full range of talents required for ground-breaking research. By doing so, India can retain its brightest minds and ensure that its higher education system remains dynamic, inclusive, and globally competitive. To maintain its position on the global academic stage, India must embrace a more holistic approach to PhD admissions — one that values creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to contribute to the complex, multifaceted world of academic research.

The views expressed are personal