

The need to examine the examination system



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Reforming the examination system to ensure its credibility is a key way
to improve educational standards

Every examination season, the media reports scandals that engulf some universities or even school boards. The credibility of the examination system is linked to the standard of the certificates that the examination/school boards issue. The lack of credibility of the examination system in educational institutions affects educational standards because learning is conditioned by the proposed examination system. Teaching and learning should prepare a student to face any type of examination. On the contrary, if the examination pattern is known, say by testing mostly memory, then teaching will ensure that students only prepare for rote memory. This is the

general pattern. Further, inflation of marks and achieving a very high pass percentage are the key objectives of the education administration. Consequently, the talent search cost for employers rises. A credible examination system is one of the key ways to improve the standard of education.

Decentralised system

With more than 1,100 universities, 50,000 affiliated colleges including 700 autonomous colleges and a total enrolment of 40.15 million students, India has numerous higher education examination systems with diversified modes of assessment. There are also 60 school boards for secondary and higher secondary levels of school education, certifying more than 15 million students every year. Secrecy and standardisation are considered to be the hallmarks of good examination boards. Secrecy without proper checks and balances and audits leads to scandals. Standardisation through uniformity in examination kills experimentation in assessment and curriculum. Rather, the credibility of assessment and standard of education can be ensured only through transparency in teaching and assessment.

In educational institutions, the summative examination is to test and certify a student's learning. Its validity over time and its comparability across institutions are meaningless today. This inconsistency of the examination system is cause for concern.

An examination is supposed to have tested certain scholastic abilities, from memory to application and creation of knowledge and critical thinking. Often, there are complaints that the examination boards test only memory. So, teachers in turn coach students to memorise answers and score marks rather than teach them higher order thinking.

There are many instances where we come across question papers that have grave flaws such as language errors, errors in conceptualisation, irrelevant questions and questions that do not test higher order learning. The evaluation of answer scripts is indiscriminate, and the grades do not reflect the differences in students' learning achievements. The employability of a graduate depends on higher order learning, while examination boards do not certify students on those skills.. Our institutional examinations fail in this.

Employers disregard institutional certification and have their own rigorous assessment of a candidate's academic achievements and suitability for employment. This in turn has created a coaching market for competitive examinations and skilling.

Assessment quality

The academic side of courses should lay the foundation for calibrating a good assessment system. All regulatory institutions in India have an emphasis on outcome-based learning in institutions. There are elaborate advisories on curriculum design, pedagogy, and examination systems from all the regulatory boards. In the absence of regular and effective oversight, these advisories are hardly followed by educational institutions. The syllabi of every graduate/diploma programme will tick

most of the boxes such as course objectives, expected outcomes, and even specifying the finer details of skills to be imparted. But a careful reading of the syllabi will expose the inconsistency and inadequacies in them. Actual classroom teaching will not meet the requirements of imparting higher order thinking and skills. Therefore, a transparent oversight model and greater involvement of professional bodies in curriculum design and teaching should help in establishing a proper assessment system. We cannot wait for curriculum change to get over to effect examination reforms. Rather, both processes should happen simultaneously.

Another important problem of assessment is the secrecy involved in the whole examination process, from question paper setting to evaluation of answer scripts and mark sheet preparation. Bad apples among teachers have the cover of confidentiality for their mediocre work. Confidentiality is also a cause for scandals in examinations. A larger examination system is designed to ensure a uniform standard of assessments. But the problem with larger systems is that they are prone to 'malfunctioning' and facilitate malpractices that make a mockery of uniformity and confidentiality.

Regulatory bodies encourage colleges to go in for academic autonomy and certify their students based on their own examinations, but the degrees/diplomas that are conferred are on a par with all others by the affiliating university. Autonomy regulations give little oversight authority for the affiliating university on the autonomous college examination system. The higher education regulator truly believes in decentralisation through autonomous institutions without oversight. Standardisation of examinations is a farce.

In a decentralised education system, confidentiality and standardisation of the examination system matter little, but ensuring a minimum standard is essential. Transparency and proper oversight take lead roles in the examination systems to ensure this.

Steps to take

If minimum standards of learning outcomes are specified, there are numerous ways to achieve them. Academics in every branch of knowledge write on curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment systems. Research in teaching of subjects in both schools and colleges is vibrant. There are subject specific and skill specific assessment processes. Continuous assessment through the course leaves the entire assessment process in the hands of the teacher. Though this system is often riddled with subjective and lenient assessment, proper documentation and real time oversight with participative process of students' assessment of teachers should make it better. Summative assessment and evaluation should also be made transparent, with checks and balances.

The use of technology in assessment enhances credibility. The setting of question papers can be standardised in terms of academic content, and evaluation can be standardised with checks and balances. The market provides a variety of software

solutions to every aspect of assessment, for both centralised and distributed systems of assessments.

All sorts of negligence, fraud and academic inadequacies and other quality issues should be codified, and corrective measures/punishment also should be linked to such codes. Transparency in accessing the evaluation process by students and measures to address their grievances should be in place.

An external audit of assessment systems in universities and school boards is essential. Such audit reports should cover all the processes based on established principles and benchmarks set by educationists to ensure reliability and consistency of examination systems. Grading examination boards in terms of transparency, reliability and consistency should be a part of audit reports. Such audit reports should be released soon after the completion of every major cycle of examinations, say as half-yearly reports.

We expect university degrees and school board certificates to reflect the learning achievements of students, and examination boards should assess students comprehensively, in a challenging way. Grades should distinguish students by their academic attainments. While the confidentiality of the process and consistency in grading with uniform standards are desired features of examination systems, the real features are transparency in process and credibility by adhering to at least minimum acceptable standards.