

# Examining the Examination System

*The present exam system is essentially atrophied and unless it is drastically revised, scandals about the exams are bound to crop up regularly. The academic community has to address three issues at least: how to make the present student-teacher ratio less skewed than it is today; how to reduce the over-centralisation that has become chronic, and to dispassionately consider the current practices for preserving confidentiality and for maintaining uniformity of standards.*

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In the generally permissive academic life in India, another scandal involving examinations is no big news. Most academic centres have a regular season of exams, generally twice a year. Almost as regularly, reports of malpractices in their conduct surface from dozens of places twice a year. Question papers are available to the examinees before the scheduled exam, (for a price, of course), question papers do not reach the exam centres on time or wrong question papers are sent. Copying is rampant. Answer books are replaced at the exam centres or in transit; results do not come out in time. When they do come out, they are riddled with inconsistencies and gross mistakes. The country has seen them all. And continues to see them, twice every year, if not from university X then from college Y.

The story is the same with mass examinations conducted by other bodies. Recently, examinations conducted by Public Service Commissions of Maharashtra and Punjab made headlines for similar reasons. So did some entrance examinations conducted by the Railway Board. Even the entrance exam of the prestigious Institutes of Managements had to be rescheduled because of the leakage of the question paper. The latest to join the list is the CBSE whose pre-medical examination had to be rescheduled for the leakage of the question paper. Yet, on the whole, the SSC/HSC Boards seem to be doing a better job of conducting mass examinations than most universities, but just barely so.

The aftermath of such scandals also follows a pattern. Generally, one sees different pillars of the administrative system trading accusations and holding each other responsible, even holding

inquiries against each other, 'to fix the responsibility'. On some occasions, educational authorities are able to pinpoint some individuals and the guilty are even rapped on the knuckles. But reports of these inquiries are never made public and rarely acted upon. The episode is forgotten till the next scandal breaks out, if not from the same place then from another.

But even in such easy and cozy milieu, recent events in the University of Mumbai stand out. In the current examinations season, a BCom question paper leaked out not once but twice, even after rescheduling. Closely following that, it came out that four different question papers of the same university had also leaked out. The vice-chancellor of the university also must be the first one in the country who, showing uncommon candor among educational authorities, advised students that they have to be prepared for such trauma (of undergoing re-examinations). According to reports, a college teacher in Mumbai is charged with the latter crime. But going by the past record, it would be quite surprising if the subsequent events follow a pattern any different than the one described above. There are certainly no indications that either the government or the university are applying themselves to facing the basic issues.

The very fact that exam scandals break out so regularly and from all over the country makes it clear that something is terribly rotten in the whole system. Yet, remarkably enough, this fact does not seem to have registered on those who determine educational policies and implement them. Reforming the examination system has to be given priority in educational planning but it is not on anyone's agenda today. It is true that the UGC had taken up the problem about 20 years back. It awarded large

grants to some dozen universities in the country to study the issue and carry out reforms in the system. The grants from the UGC are spent a long time back, but there is nothing to show for the money or the labours. In almost all universities and colleges in the country, the old system continues without any significant change.

Of late, some universities and exam boards have introduced a few additional precautionary measures, such as introduction of a bar-code to ensure secrecy of the identity of a candidate, sending 'flying squads' of inspectors to examination centres suspected of encouraging malpractices, not sending the question paper to the exam centre till as late as possible and so on. None of these have proved particularly effective and scandals connected with examinations continue to crop up as regularly as before. As a matter of fact, innovations of this kind don't even address the problem, leave alone solve it. For the officials this is only a matter of organisation, a law and order problem if you wish. Actually, the roots of the exam crisis are academic and unless the academic side of the problem is taken care of, it cannot be solved effectively.

This note deals mainly with the problems of university exams; those facing the school boards and other organisers of mass exams have to be discussed separately. They face problems of somewhat different nature, mainly because they do not have a pool of examiners on call that colleges and universities do. But every university suffers from an acute shortage of examiners for almost all examinations. This can be and is partly tackled by making examination work compulsory or by increasing the examiners' fees but the root cause for this is the very poor student-teacher ratio in most of the colleges. The ratio is particularly adverse in commerce and law faculties, from which a majority of these scandals seem to originate. If you have one teacher per 100 students or even 80 and each teacher teaching to three or four such classes, it is going to be very difficult to find adequate number of examiners when the exam season is upon you.

Because of the university regulations, many of these teachers are ineligible to be examiners, for they lack sufficient experience or are temporary. The recent introduction of hiring 'teachers by the hour' has only worsened the situation. Many teachers are thus not available for exam duties. All this limits the pool of teachers available for exam work. A university has to make do with those who volunteer, thus

allowing easy entry to unscrupulous examiners. What is really depressing is that this adverse effect of the prevalent student-teacher ratio is never highlighted by the unions of either students or teachers.

## Two Hindrances to Reform

Two factors have been major hindrances in the way of any meaningful reforms in the exam system. They are so well-entrenched in the system that they have now almost become articles of faith to most academics. The first is an excessive recourse to secrecy in the entire system. Today, the entire process of examinations is shrouded in layers upon layers of confidentiality. Confidentiality is a convenient shroud to cover both the crooked and the incompetent. Academic community and the general public have to seriously question the need for the present all-pervading level of secrecy in the matter of examinations. It is true that the system of keeping the identity of the paper-setters and of those who mark the answer books secret (at least in theory) is followed for donkey's years in all Indian universities. But that is no reason that it should be continued unthinkingly. One really has to stop and consider whether the present degree of confidentiality practised by universities is academically justified and whether it is really all that confidential in practice. The numerous scandals that break out periodically show that a good part of this confidentiality is illusory.

It is argued that if the examiners are known to the students and the public, undue influence will be brought upon them; sometimes examiners are also under a threat of life and limb. But cannot these unscrupulous elements bring the same undue influence or the threat of violence to bear upon the university administrators who organise the examinations now, who are in charge of all the arrangements from appointing the examiners to getting the question papers printed, distributed, and finally to compile and declare the results? After all, finding out who the controller of examinations is or who his assistants are takes only a few minutes of inquiry. Surely, it is no one's argument that the University officials are generally more upright than the academics in the universities/colleges. Both come from the same stock of educated community in the country.

Obviously, the larger the number of personnel involved in conducting an exam, more are the chances of leakages, malfunctioning, malpractices. This is precisely what the country is witnessing today.

Commonsense suggests that to reduce the number of persons involved, there should be as much decentralisation of the exams as possible. But in practice, one finds the university officials obsessed with even micro-management of the exams. This makes it easy for unscrupulous individuals to twist the system to serve their ends. Insistence on confidentiality in the present system enables them to wield authority without any responsibility. High school boards have regional boards and have decentralised a good part of their work, universities need to take a leaf out of their book.

Organising exams only through the controller of examinations is neither a guarantee of an honest or efficient system nor of preserving its confidentiality effectively. It is time to try out decentralisation of the functions of that office. One may also remember that secrecy is lost anyway at the time of laboratory/practical examinations, when the examinees are actually face to face with the examiners. Time has surely come to try out similar methods for written examinations also. Actually, this author knows that, for many years now, some written examinations are indeed organised by the concerned teachers themselves in the universities of Mumbai and Pune. This has created no scandals, nor has it affected the reputations of these universities.

Along with the obsession with confidentiality, the present examination system is driven by another article of faith – namely, “maintaining uniformity of standards” of the exams. Blind faith in it has proved to be the main hurdle in decentralisation. This commitment to maintaining of uniform standards forces the examining body to arrange to have the same question paper at the same time at dozens of centres; in case of the high school boards, at hundreds of centres. Each university is jealous about preserving its reputation and it is accepted without question that this can only be ensured by having a common exam paper in every subject in each exam. This belief needs to be examined with an open mind. Particularly because it is noted that most of the scandals that surface can be traced to some fault in the distribution system.

As it is, having a common examination every year does not really help much in “preserving the uniformity of standards” because marking of the answer books varies from person to person. It is not possible to eliminate this variation despite the best efforts of the moderators. Furthermore, even if the examinations are conducted fairly and the answer books are moderated

competently over many centres, say in 2003 and 2004, how does one compare the results of 2003 with those of 2004? The question papers are not going to be same. If the variation in the question papers is acceptable for different years, why is it not for the same year? On a larger scale, what is the assurance that for any given degree, the standards of university X are same as the standard of university Y? In fact, most academics will assert that they are not. Students and the public do accept this differentiation.

At the time of practical examinations in science and engineering subjects students accept without argument that they will be tested on different practicals. In business management courses and in engineering courses also, students or groups of them are assigned generally different projects that are then assessed as on equal footing, without a word of protest from the examinees. It is high time that the mindset that governs the organisation of various written exams is changed. It has to be accepted that standards can be maintained even by having a variety of question papers

This can be achieved by involving colleges more purposefully in the matter of exams. It is true that most exams today are held in colleges, yet at present, the role of the college authorities and faculties is no more than that of a couriers and invigilators. Just as a university is proud of its standing, so are the colleges affiliated to it, a factor that is not made use of in the present scheme. By utilising it, a good part of the work of the examination section of a university can be transferred to colleges, achieving decentralisation of administration, a goal to which everyone is nominally committed. For example, a college or a group of neighbouring colleges can be given complete responsibility for an examination – from setting up of the question papers to the final declaration of results. Serious thought should be given to holding the exam of a student in his own college and adding the name of the college on the mark-sheet and the degree certificate. Colleges and faculties that take pride in their institute are certain to welcome this recognition of their institute.

Another aspect of the current exam system has gone unnoticed. In today's scheme of things, a college or a university has really no fall-back system in case the final exam has to be cancelled/rescheduled for any reason. Most colleges have no systematic record of periodic tests if they give any, no results of any preliminary exam, no way of monitoring the academic

progress of a student over the year that they could use if the final examination has to be cancelled for any reason. In some colleges, even the attendance records are kept only perfunctorily. These have to be part of the academic programme of any good college but none of these activities can be taken up seriously unless the student-teacher ratio improves.

It is high time that teachers who prepare question papers as well as those who mark the answer books are identified and made to take the responsibility for their handiwork. Keeping their names confidential does not serve much purpose anyway. Because after all, the boards of study or the deans' committees that choose the examiners can be easily identified. Centralised assessment system, suitably modified, will make it unnecessary to keep the examiners secret.

This will also help remove another gross injustice that is practised by many universities on the examinees in recent years. Lately, many universities in India, by changing statutes, have taken away the right of an examinee to appeal for re-assessment of his marked answer book if he has a reason to believe that it is not correctly assessed. A student is never shown marked answer book. Such refusal to take cognisance of a student's complaint cannot be justified on any count – moral, academic or even legal. A university has to be ready to assist a student in solving his every legitimate grievance and an examiner has to accept the responsibility for his actions. Considering the number of scandals that break out every year in the exam system, it is reasonably clear that a good proportion of requests for re-assessment are bound to be well-founded. Correct course for a university will be not only to re-assess answer books under question, but to do so in the presence of the student, at a hefty fee if necessary to keep out frivolous complaints. This will be possible if the educational authorities give up their obsession about confidentiality.

The present exam system is essentially atrophied and unless it is drastically revised, scandals about the exams are bound to crop up regularly. Many of the remedies are in the hands of the academics themselves, without involving the government or any change in the Universities Act. But first of all, the academic community has to be ready for a serious debate on three issues at least. One is how to make the present student-teacher ratio less skewed than it is today. The second is how to reduce the over-centralisation that has become chronic

in the present scheme. The third is to dispassionately consider the current practices for preserving confidentiality and for

maintaining uniformity of standards. It is distressing to note that the questions raised here are not on anyone's agenda. **EPW**