

{ INTERVIEW } M JAGADESH KUMAR, UGC CHAIRPERSON

'CUET need of hour... will provide level playing field for students'

NEW DELHI: A day after the University Grants Commission (UGC) announced that central universities will admit students in undergraduate courses solely on the basis of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) from the 2022-23 academic year, chairperson M Jagadesh Kumar said the examination will provide equal opportunity to students from different backgrounds and education boards.

In an interview with Fareeha Iftikhar, Kumar dismissed apprehensions that the new test will make high school performance irrelevant and said universities will be allowed to set minimum eligibility criteria in terms of class 12 scores of candidates. Edited excerpts:

Why a common entrance test?

One of the reasons why we introduced a common entrance test is to reduce the burden on students. Students right now are applying to different universities and appearing in different entrance exams for undergraduate admissions. At the same time, they also have to focus on their board exams to get 99% and 100% marks. We should not assume that

all central universities were conducting admissions on the basis of class 12 marks. Many universities have already been conducting their entrance exams for undergraduate admissions. Multiple exams were causing a lot of stress not just among the students but also their parents. Another reason why NEP 2020 advocated for a one nation one entrance exam was to provide equal opportunity to students from different backgrounds and different education boards. It will provide a kind of level playing ground for students.

Will class 12 performance become irrelevant now?

Absolutely not. If the students want to do well in CUET, they will have to acquire knowledge in school. Besides, the universities will be allowed to fix their minimum qualifying criteria in terms of class 12 marks, as they are already fixing. For instance, they can say students should have maybe 50% or 60% marks in their board exams in addition to their CUET scores to enrol with them. The UGC will not fix any minimum criteria and it will be left to the universities to decide. However, to appear in CUET, students will have to just pass the class 12

examinations.

This is not a new concept. For admissions to IITs, we have been considering JEE scores only.

The test will be based on the syllabus prescribed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). How will it provide equal opportunity to students from other boards?

The syllabus will be announced in the first week of April and the examination will be held in July. So, there will be enough time for students to see if there is any difference between NCERT syllabus and their syllabus, and prepare for it. From next year onwards, students will already be aware of the syllabus.

What will be the structure of the exam?

The exam will be divided into three parts. The first part will have a compulsory language paper. There will be a choice of 13 languages. The second part of CUET is focused on testing a candidate's domain-specific knowledge. This section offers a total of 27 domains. A candidate can attempt up to six domains. Every central university will announce which



domain specific test a candidate has to take for which programme. The third part will be a general test with questions on general knowledge, current affairs, numerical ability, quantitative reasoning, logical and analytical reasoning. There will also be an optional language exam for students who want to pursue language courses.

Students will appear at assigned examination centres and the test will be a computerised, with multiple-choice questions. Students will be allowed to solve their problems on a piece of paper and mark their

CUET: Origins go back to 2010

WHY NOW?

The CUET was initially introduced as the CUCET in 2010, a year after 12 new central varsities were set up. At present, 14 central varsities conduct admissions through it. Its wider expansion was mooted in NEP 2020, which sought a common entrance test for all varsities.

After several discussions, a panel looking into the suggestion recommended it be implemented from 2021-22 academic year but that was pushed back by a year due to challenges posed by Covid-19.

THE BOARDS QUESTION

A section of school principals raised concerns over the 100% weight to CUET score in admissions. "Board exams should be given 50% weightage and 50% to CUET for admission in university. Otherwise, parents will send children to coaching centres for competitive exams and not be interested in sending them to school after class 10," said Sudha Acharya, chairperson, National Progressive School Conference.

answers on the computer.

Will there be negative marking?

Yes, there will be some negative marking just to bring in some granularity. Otherwise, a lot of bunching will happen. There will be many students at any given mark.

How will the test facilitate the interdisciplinary movement from school to college?

Students can write exams in up to six domain subjects. They can

choose the appropriate subjects as per their choice, irrespective of their domain knowledge in class 12. For instance, they can appear in business studies and political science at the same time.

Besides, universities can use the general test score for cross-disciplinary admissions. For example, if the university wants to admit students in BA political science, they don't have to look for students who have studied political science in class 12. They can select students through their general test score. However, these guidelines

will be decided by the individual universities. I appeal to the universities to give wider opportunities to students and make cross disciplinary admissions easier for them.

How will the universities select candidates?

First, they can fix some qualifying marks in class 12 exams. Second, from among qualified candidates who have applied, they can make a merit list on the basis of their CUET scores.

Will more than one attempt in a year be allowed?

This year we have decided to conduct the exam only once. But in future we might try to give more than one opportunity to students to appear in CUET.

What about skill-based courses having major practical components?

For such courses, including music, painting, sculpture and theatre, the universities will be allowed to conduct practical exams or interviews along with CUET.

Is there a risk CUET will mutate into a tuition-driven competition?

This apprehension is there because we have seen what had happened in case of the professional courses. But we should understand there is huge competition in these courses, including engineering or medical (courses), due to the limited number of seats. That is why coaching has also come into the picture there.

In case of non-professional programmes in the university system, for which the CUET will be conducted, we have close to 1,050 universities including 45 central universities. The number of students competing for each seat here are less than those competing for the professional courses. Therefore, I do not see any need for coaching here. The syllabus will be strictly restricted to the class 12 NCERT books.

How will it affect the minority universities and colleges?

If any university reserves a certain percentage for local or internal students, it will continue to do that. The only difference is that these students will also have to come through CUET like students that will be admitted in general seats. The reservation policies and ordinances of varsities will remain unchanged.