

REVAMPING THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXAMINATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Examinations occupy a very significant place in higher education. To a student, they are an instrument to test what he has learnt and retained in his mind during the course of the study and to a teacher examination gives a stimulus and goal orientation in his work. Examinations are inevitable without which the work of students and teachers will neither have precision nor any direction. However, over a period of time examinations have become an end in themselves instead of means of evaluation emphasizing on rote memorization of facts, securing of minimum qualifying marks, getting degree certificates by the job-seekers, thereby, in the process ignoring the practical training for life and work. We, thus, need to ask: Are the conventional methods of conducting the examinations effective? Does the current assessment system provide the necessary space for learning? This has imparted seriousness to any discussion on examination reforms in the academic circles and amongst the policy makers at the highest levels. The objective of the paper is to throw light on the significant aspects of examination reforms in the university education system. The paper has been divided into four sections. Section I gives an introduction to an examination system in the higher education system of India from the historical perspective and Objectives of Examinations. Section II discusses the drawbacks in the examination system. Section III lists the suggested reforms in the examination system along with the impediments in the implementation of reforms and Section IV concludes the paper.

Section I

Introduction: Historical Perspective

Education has always been amalgam of teaching and testing enterprises. Examination system in India is quite old and unique practiced since ancient times in the 'Gurukulas' and 'Ashramas'. These institutions developed specific system for measuring the knowledge, learning capacity

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and skills of the disciples. The teachers used to test the knowledge through written and oral examinations to certify the scholarship of learners. The examination system was instituted in India by the British Government on the British model with the establishment of four Universities in Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Delhi. It was based on the recommendations of the Wood's Dispatch (1858) to conduct matriculation examinations in India with the stated objective of identifying the level of attainment at a particular point of time. The newly introduced examination system, no doubt, appealed to the common man as a more methodical and systematic one making its acceptance smooth. It was indeed a politically motivated decision for linking examination certification for jobs as an economically viable factor.

The establishment of the three universities in the three presidencies brought in their wake some criticism of the examination system which Britishers had introduced. It was realized that the external examination system was the result of a political conspiracy deliberately hatched for undermining the indigenous system of testing by indirectly under-rating it. The manipulations were an attempt to downgrade the traditional system of education already in vogue. Quite stealthily and cleverly they tried to boost the importance of external examination, which in a positive manner, tended to reduce the importance of our indigenous examination system. The enticements of formal certification of qualifications as a requirement of jobs and also admission to courses of higher education was done to further enhance the prestige of this examination system.

Objectives of Examinations

Examinations are an extremely important part of the entire education system all over the world. The subject of examinations and evaluation occupies an important place in the field of education. Examinations are the central point around which every activity of educational process revolves. Examinations are conducted for each stage at the end of the academic session with the following objectives.

- a) They decide the eligibility of students for different courses of study at different levels of education.
- b) They are used as a means to organize and integrate knowledge, encourage student to go through various books and integrate ideas to respond to a given problem.

- c) They are a guide to the parents and teachers to know from time to time how the pupils are progressing and what their attainments are at any particular stage.
- d) It is equally necessary for the society to assure itself that the work entrusted to its educational institutions is being carried out on satisfactorily and that the students studying there are receiving the right type of education and attaining the expected standards. This kind of check up of education is essential in the interests of all concerned – pupils, teachers, parents and the public. Examinations are the usual means adopted for this purpose.

Examinations are conducted internally and externally. Internal examinations are conducted by schools/colleges from time to time and atleast once during the year for evaluating the progress of the students and grading them, and when the time comes, for selecting and promoting them to higher class. External examinations come generally at the end of the session. Its purpose is two fold: selective and qualifying, selecting those who have successfully completed a course and qualifying them from among many for the next higher stage.

Section II

Drawbacks in the Examination System

The examinations are an important means of assessing the ability and intellect of the students but they have come to dominate the education system. The examinations have become an end and the means to provide education. The ability of a student has come to be determined by examinations and there is no place for assessing the performance and critical thinking of the student in full academic session. Resultantly, stagnation has crept in the whole education and examination system of India generating stress among students. This has necessitated an urgent need to introduce reforms in the examination process.

Though the talk of examination reforms was going on even before independence but the examination reforms attained urgency in recent years so as to meet the challenges thrown by the emerging knowledge based society. The 20th Century has witnessed the widening of the meaning and scope of education. The demands of education system of today concerns not only with the intellectual pursuits but also with the emotional and social development of the child, his physical and mental health, his social adjustment

and other equally important aspects of his life i.e. all round development of the personality. The limitations and effects of examination system on our educational system were analysed by a number of educational committees appointed during the British rule and after independence. The first serious attempt at examination reforms by the Government of India was taken by appointing Radhakrishnan Commission on Higher Education in 1948. The Commission strongly felt the need for reforming education and examination system. Later on number of commissions and committees has studied the problems plaguing our examination system.

Our education system is universally criticized for a number of gaps in our examination system. If examinations are to be of real value they must take into consideration the new facts and test in detail the all-round development of pupils. Even as they test the intellectual attainments of pupils, the validity and usefulness of the present pattern of examinations has been widely questioned. It has been argued that the present system of examining by means of essay-type questions leaves so much scope for the subjectivity of the examiners that it can not be relied upon to any great extent. Some critical issues in the present examination system are as under:

1. Emphasis on Rote Memorization Rather Than Being Analytical

In our education, it is very easy to take stock of the question paper. The student can have a list and can go on repeating in order to get passed or get a rank. If a question comes this year, we can surely expect that the question is not going to come next year and as there is only one alternative to this question, that question is kept in temporary memory, can write exam and come out with flying colours. Analytical questions are not asked in exams and students got used to traditional methods and are not analyzing any issues which are resulting into graduate degree holders with no knowledge. The tests and examinations conducted at present are only testing the memory power of the students and not measuring the soft skills in the student and ignoring the testing of higher order skills of learning like analysis, synthesis and problem solving, understanding and the application of knowledge and skills.

2. Subjectivity

There is high level of subjectivity in the written examinations which operates at three levels:

a) At the level of paper setter: Question papers are set in a lopsided manner

where some content areas are over-emphasized and other areas completely neglected. Indeed, sometimes questions have been set which do not synchronize with the course content and the text books.

b) At the level of examinee in writing answers: The examinee operates very often due to the vague wording of the questions interprets the dimensions of the expected answer in his own idiosyncratic way. This leads to a host of differences of approach to answering the same question.

c) At the level of the evaluator evaluating the answer books: The subjectivity of the examinee (who may or may not have set the paper) is very dangerous. In the absence of precise directions, regarding the scoring of the answer scripts, he tends to judge the answers from the viewpoint of his own biases. He might even veer into recklessness in attempts to meet his examination reporting deadlines.

3. Stress Generating among the Students

The examination pattern, due to its inherent flaws, has become a source of stress generation among the students. Most of institutions do not give admission on marks basis. They have a separate test and this trend is growing rapidly because they have no faith in this examination system. The question then arises: What is the importance of getting more and more marks in an examination? Just getting admission in a reputed educational institution or making first impression to any employer firm! If any one gets a job then he must have to perform well on practical front. Marks of any examination won't work there. Only practical knowledge will work there. Unfortunately, these institutions too rely on examinations for assessment of a student. This faulty examination system is forcing many students to commit suicide every year.

The mindset of the society is also responsible for making examinations a source of stress. If someone scores good marks in examination then society starts treating him like a hero. On the other hand if someone scores less marks then society treats him just like an untouchable.

4. Poor Content Coverage

The poor coverage of the content by question papers had become such a common feature that nobody seemed to take any serious view of it. This phenomenon was unmistakably impairing the entire teaching-learning process. It exerted undesirable influences by encouraging selective study on the part of the students and selective teaching on the part of the teachers.

5. Effect on Teaching-Learning Processes

Our examination system has also dented the teaching-learning processes. The examinations have come to dominate not only the course content but also the methods of teaching. Students' entire focus through out his academic career is on passing the examinations rather than on developing critical thinking. Students are only interested in cramming, notes rather than reading text-books and original books which help him pass examinations on which his future depends. Most of the time is spent on the conduct of examinations leaving very little time for teaching and learning.

On the other hand, to the teacher also examinations are an easy method of grading pupils and pronouncing judgements on their work rather than showing progress on intangible aspects of good education such as character training, well rounded personality, a wholesome social adjustment and a proper development of appreciation of finer values of life. Making the matters worse for the teacher, his success is very often measured by the results of his pupils in the examinations.

The attitude of parents also lends support to this state of affairs since the employability is linked to passing of the external examinations.

6. Manual System of Examination

The examination process in most of the Universities is manual causing both physical and mental stress to the examinees – delay in publication of results, thus, students remaining idle for months together since they cannot join further studies or appear in competitive examination or join jobs. In the examination branches the correspondence of students/applications takes long time, students jostle in various service windows purchasing examination forms, depositing examination fee and getting to know the status of their results. The system leads to errors, time consumption, inefficiency and wastage of valuable resources. Moreover, the manual record is difficult to manage, store securely and making its retrieval very time consuming. Their remain chances of tempering of students records, sometimes fake degrees are prepared as there is no online verification of the same. This leads to unfair practices and also mars the credibility of the university. There is duplication of work in the existing system as the same data is recorded in different branches of the examination.

Thus, all the circumstances conspire today to put an undue and unnatural

emphasis on examinations specially the external examinations which has come to exercise a restricting influence over the entire field of Indian education and teaching-learning process. Many complained of the hampering effect of the examinations – examinations dictating the curriculum instead of following it, preventing any experimentation, hampering proper treatment of subjects and sound methods of teaching, fostering a dull uniformity rather than originality, encouraging the average pupil to concentrate too rigidly upon too narrow field and thus helping him to develop wrong values in education. Pupils assess education in terms of success in examinations. Teachers, recognising the importance of external examinations to the individual pupil, are constrained to relate their teaching to an examination which can test only a narrow field of pupils' interests and capacities and so inevitably neglect the qualities which are more important though less tangible. They are forced to attend to what can be examined, and to 'spoon-feed' their pupils rather encourage habits of independent thinking and study. Notes are dictated at every stage of education and when they are not given the children feel unhappy and helpless.

Section III

Suggested Reforms in the Examination System

Whatever be the limitations of the examination system in India it must be realized that they have come to occupy a very dominant position in our educational system. Abolition of examinations will not serve the purpose. What is required today is recasting of the examination system by thoroughly reforming it.

1. Improving the Curriculum

The objective of education, curriculum contents and purposes of examination should be well co-ordinated. Thus, the curriculum should be clear on what knowledge, skills or abilities are to be developed by teaching a particular course. To infuse dynamism, curriculum has to be progressive in nature, students should be given the option of doing multiple courses, the spirit of curriculum should be projects driven and not examination driven. It should be innovation driven and should evolve and not stay stagnant.

2. Improving Teaching

In class-room teaching, the teaching-learning method should move beyond the traditional chalk-board and lecture method. These conventional

methods of teaching-learning methods should be supplemented by demonstrations, discussions, assignments, workshops, group discussions, case studies, participation and role orientations. Different types of audio-visual and other aids should be made available to the teachers. If need be, teachers should be provided necessary technical assistance and training in the new techniques of teaching.

3. Improving Question Papers to Ensure Wider Coverage and Creativity

Questions should discourage cramming and encourage originality of the thought process. They should be distributed over the entire field of the subject. Each question paper should use the three types of questions, viz. essay type (which should be specific leaving no room for guess work on the part of the students), short answer type and objective type in about equal proportion. It is desirable that the medium of instruction, paper setting and answering should be the same.

Furthermore, the examining agency should develop a design of the question setter giving specific directions regarding the dimensions of the question paper and the considerations to be kept in mind while setting it. Moreover, the students should be given less choice in questions so that marks of the students depend on the knowledge of the students rather than his choice of the question.

4. Grace Marks

In almost every examination, some grace marks are given to borderline students to enable them to pass. How many marks should be given as grace-marks is often arbitrary? It has been found that procedure for assigning grace marks is unscientific. They recommend the use of 'passing probability' instead of giving grace marks. Those students who are above a specific passing probability should be allowed to pass.

5. Improving Accuracy in Marking

Accuracy can be increased in by providing an orientation to the examiner; giving them sufficient time to do examination work, and, by reasonably limiting the number of answer books to be examined.

It has been found that i) examiners have a tendency to boost borderline cases to the next higher stage; ii) marking of previous script affects the marking of the subsequent script; iii) during the process of marking there is a considerable variation of standard; iv) though some examiners are accurate

throughout, the others vary more during the first $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ and the last $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ of the answer books. Happenings of this nature can be considerably reduced by i) providing instructions for marking; ii) use of question-wise marking in place of whole script wise marking; and, iii) providing model answers providing instructions for markings.

6. Introducing Scaling

The need for scaling the marks of different papers has been emphasized by Indian educators and researchers alike. This is because of the variability found in the marking of different papers at the examinations.

7. Internal Assessment

With the view to improve the reliability of traditional type of tests, it has been suggested, from several sectors, to have internal assessment. In spite of a tendency to give liberal marks, on the whole, internal assessment is dependable. Internal assessment should be made more frequent, more systematic, more unbiased and be given more weightage as compared to external assessment. Students' record should show his achievement in both external and internal assessment.

8. Introducing Semester System

Introducing semester system as well as undertaking periodic and systematic measurement and evaluation, use of letter grades in place of numerical marks, internal assessment, credit system, reliance on home study, assignments, seminars and use of question banks etc. goes a long way in revamping the examination system. But for all this to happen satisfactorily, it is necessary that the teachers be thoroughly oriented.

Some advantages associated with the semester system are: i) students achieve their objective in a better way; ii) convenient for the teacher to improve the curriculum contents; and, iii) periodical tests necessitate that the students study seriously throughout the semester.

9. Introducing Viva Voce Examination

Internal (mid-semester or semester-end) and external viva-voce test should form part of the overall final examination especially for post graduate and professional courses. Viva voce tests should be conducted to test an examinee's qualities of oral expression like pronunciation, grammatical correctness, vocabulary and usage, thought content and its organization, delivery, manners and gestures.

10. Selection of Examiners

Examiners should be carefully selected, failing which some of them in their ignorance may make such demands upon candidates as cannot be satisfied. The teachers who have taught them and who know the students best are the most suitable persons to examine the candidates. This is the reason people prefer internal examiners but they are also not free from personal biases and prejudices. It would be better if with the help of experts instructions are drawn up for marking the scripts.

11. Use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

The use of ICT will ensure the transparency and reliability of the system of examination, evaluation and reporting. This will minimize human intervention since the use of ICT promises compact storage, speedy retrieval of data and untiring diligent work. Total automation of the system will facilitate integration of all branches physically, streamline the procedure for collation of examination fees, issuing receipts to large number of students, improvement in the quality of services, effective monitoring of examination processes, minimization of fraudulent activities, timely availability of compiled reports, and so forth.

Impediments to Examination Reforms

The very term 'reform' envisages the existence of something to be changed. Reform is invariably a difficult task to accomplish, because the traditional procedures and practices have become deeply rooted in the system. In the process of examination reform, the following hurdles have been encountered:

1. Inherent Resistance to Change

- a) by universities and colleges as it involved a reorganization of the administrative machinery and procedures;
- b) by teachers, because of their unpreparedness for taking up the challenges of the new system and because of additional work involved;
- c) by students, as post-reforms examinations are likely to become valid and reliable, and will require more precise and regular study;
- d) by unscrupulous elements, since malpractices are likely to lose ground as examinations are improved; and,
- e) by vested interests which are desirous of maintaining a status quo

which protects their powerful positions and sometimes financial gains.

2. Lack of suitable sample evaluation material of a sort that provides illustrations of the nature of reforms envisaged.
 3. Lack of financial support, as the reform measures, in terms of over-all cost, tend to make the new examinations more expensive than the traditional ones.
 4. Inadequate training of teachers for keeping up with the changed situation.
- Even though many other difficulties, problems and shortcomings pervade in India's system of education, those in the area of examinations are undoubtedly very serious. They are not intrinsic to examination activities, but these are the ones which can be remedied through effective measures. This is a challenge to educators which also radiates hope.

Section IV

Conclusion

The ills plaguing the examination system in higher education cannot be studied in isolation. Examination system intrinsically shares a forward and backward linkage with teaching and learning processes at other levels of education. Apart from the stumbling blocks in the path of examination reform, the lack of encouragement and recognition, opposition from teachers and examinees, piecemeal reforms are inherent limitations in the system.

To conclude, it can be stated that number of examination reforms have already been introduced not only in the higher education system but at the secondary and higher secondary level also like introduction of internal assessment, practical work, semester system, computerization of the examination administration, streamlining of the examination procedures, guidelines for the paper setters, ensuring objectivity in paper marking scheme and so on. We must understand the fact that these all round reforms cannot be introduced at all the levels in one go but have to be introduced in a phased manner so that there is preparedness of necessary institutions for undertaking these reforms, minimum of resistance from various stakeholders and greater acceptability to these reforms.

The survey of Indian researches in the field of examination, however,

highlights another aspect which are to be explored as yet like analysis of pupil's performance in different subjects, regional and other variations in performance and the influence of various factors on achievement, the area of administration and organization of examination remains largely unexplored, studies are needed in the effective use of examination results and feedback processes. Moreover, there is dearth of research on teachers' training, technology etc.

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