

## **Central University Entrance Test-Present and Future Implications**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper analyses the impact the Central Examination Entrance Tests (CUET) have had on students, the education system and the economy. It explores both the positive and negative implications of this centralised examination system and dwells on the future impact it may have on the lives of students, the educational industry with special emphasis on the after-school classes sector, as well as the socio-economic structure of the country as a whole. The paper also investigates similar centralised examination system prevailing in South Korea, trying to predict the future of CUET through an ongoing example.*

### **Introduction**

This paper analyses the present and future impact of the Central University entrance examinations on the economy and the students. It explores both the positive and negative implications these educational reforms might have and dwells upon the possible reforms needed for the better implementation of this reform.

### **Method**

This paper is based on about 50 different secondary research papers, books, and newspaper/magazine articles on the topic. This paper also tries to compare and contrast the findings through surveys conducted by various news channels and personal surveys of 20 professors having 10+ years of teaching experience in reputed universities and CUET applicants (students).

### **Background**

The Central University entrance test is an examination conducted yearly by the National Testing Agency (NTA) for the enrolment of students into various under-graduation programmes offered at all central universities including Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia

Islamia, English and Foreign language Universities and the University of Allahabad. It was introduced in 2022, replacing the smaller Central University Common Entrance Test (CUCET) – held for a section of mostly new central universities. Aiming towards reducing the pressure created by extremely high cut-offs for admission into the prestigious universities of India and making the general admission process more fair and standardised. It tests children on their aptitude and knowledge for various subjects, including mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, economics and general knowledge. At present, universities are given the autonomy of deciding the weightage allotted to CUET marks in their admission process and the courses they want to offer based on the exam. Still, with the foreseen decreasing importance of 12th Board examination marks, CUET may become the major or sole arbiter.

This decision has been controversial and has left people divided. While some do believe it to be helpful, others have expressed their scepticism and view it as a detrimental decision for education. Many people believe that this step may lead to economic discrimination due to candidates from well-off families having more resources to face these exams. In their opinion, this may even result in a boom of coaching centres for CUET preparations and become no different from other competitive exams. Some also are worried about the adverse impact this decision might have on students' mental health, as now they would be required to prepare for Board exams as well as the CUET. It has been marred with other controversies as well, such as inefficient and inadequate communication with the candidates (an example being the Jammu and Kashmir candidates, who were left stranded after their allotted examination centres were out of Jammu and Kashmir, this situation was sorted at the nick of time but left many distressed), and the delay in results putting children into a dilemma of choosing between committing to private universities or risk waiting for a rank, that might not even bag them a spot in their desired university. Those people in support of this decision believe that the exam would help reduce the stress of taking multiple college entrance exams on children and would also make the playing field for all students more fair and equal. They believe so, due to unstandardised board examinations having nonuniform marking schemes, which may give unnecessary advantage to some students.

## **EQUALITY**

One of CUET's main aims is to ensure a level playing field for all students of India regardless of where they come from, their financial background, or which board they have studied in. In the year preceding the introduction of CUET, the cut-off rates had become impossibly high with some undergraduate cut-offs being 100 per cent, furthered, by an unequal distribution of marks among different boards due to the difference in the marking schemes, syllabus, leniency and questions across various board. It also gives children another chance to improve their score, reducing the high stakes placed on the Board Examinations. Another reason (that remains

unaddressed by the introduction of CUET) for these high cut of rates could be seen in an ‘All India Survey on Higher Education’: which found that the number of colleges per lakh population was as low as 25 on the national average. This problem is further worsened by the limited amount of seats present in these universities, example being the 3.5 lakh students applying for only 50,000 seats available in Delhi universities. The majority of higher education institutions also lack infrastructure and faculty, therefore students prefer to apply to a select few colleges with better facilities. More demand for those seats, mixed with no change in the supply of seats, will result in excess demand, which would ultimately shoot the cut-off rates and recreate the same problem. This would encourage learning for testing rather than knowledge and deplete the innovativeness and holistic thinking of a child.

## **Commercialisation and Commodification in School Education**

### **1. Economic Discrimination**

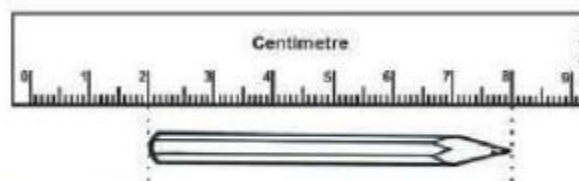
N Sukumar, a professor in the Department of Political Science, at Delhi University (DU) said “It is true that it will reduce the financial burden as students will not have to appear for multiple tests. This will make it easier for students from marginalised backgrounds”. Students will now have to pay only for the CUET examination and not for every individual central university they have to apply for. Although this has made the process less costly, it has also created a market for CUET coaching programmes. Earlier parents and guardians were only expected to shell money for school tuition and/or the competitive exam coaching of their child’s choice, but now to even get entrance into central universities for undergraduate programmes parents would have to shell out additional money if they plan to send their child for CUET preparatory courses. This will alleviate the financial burden on them and would be a setback for the children whose parents can’t afford to send them for coaching.

### **2. Educational Coaching Industry**

According to the data published by the National Sample Survey in 2016, there are 7.1 crore students enrolled in tuition classes. With the coaching industry’s growth projected to reach Rs 1,33,995 crore by 2028, according to Infinium Global Research (a consultancy firm based in Pune), it wouldn't be misguided to call this industry a new boom. According to ASSOCHAM (The associated chambers of Commerce and Industry in India) Indian edtech startups have received total investment of US\$ 3.94 billion across 155 deals in FY22. Every year more and more anxious parents enroll their children into coaching institutions, the ‘cram schools’, hoping a secure future for them. The Annual Status of Education Report, 2022, found that 30.5% of rural children in Class 1-8 were taking paid, private coaching classes. In some of the states, the percentage was much higher: 72% in Bihar, 74% in West Bengal and 45% in Jharkhand, while in

economically developed states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the numbers remain low at 9-10%.

Parents no longer see normal schooling as the key to helping their children crack competitive exams. In fact, public opinion of it becoming impossible to crack exams like JEE and NEET if not enrolled in a reputable coaching centre from class 9, remains popular. The Annual Status of Education Report, 2023, released in January, showcased the alarming state of learning outcomes among rural children between the ages of 14-18 years. Less than 40% of those surveyed could solve basic arithmetic problems such as the one given below



**What is the length of this pencil?**

When such importance is placed on certain institutions, it doesn't take long for them to become exploitative. On account of there being no regulations and accountability placed on them, these booming centres use aggressive marketing techniques such as selling parents and aspirants false promises of guaranteed success, over-inflating their success rates and building on the anxieties and vulnerability of parents. There also remains a lack of transparency and justification for charging an exuberant amount of fees (though the fee remains less than that of many reputed private schools). The government is taking some steps to regulate the coaching industry, such as not allowing centres' to admit students below 16 years of age or those students who are yet to complete their secondary education.

### **3. Unemployment crisis in India**

The unemployment crisis in India isn't the main focus of this paper, but it is one of the topics that greatly influences the perception of competitive exams like CUET, JEE and NEET. As unemployment rates increase, the pressure on exam takers and their families increase. The unemployment rate in India has increased to 8% as of February, 2024. The figure has been continually rising for over a decade, with nearly two-thirds of the population ( 1.43 billion people) being under 35 years of age and 12 million additional people reaching employment age every year, a staggering 42% young graduates under 25 years old remain unemployed. The unavailability of jobs, increases the competition. Hence rendering centralised exams brought into reduce academic stress on students counterintuitive. In the future, CUET would also end up having extremely high cut of rates and the problem would persist.

#### **4. Educational budget**

The National Educational Policy 2020 recommends that the education budget remain 6% of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Over the past decade, covering the period from 2014-15 to 2024-25, the budget for the Department of School Education has consistently witnessed annual increases. There has been a cumulative rise of 72%, with an average annual growth rate of 5.5%. However, the share of the budget estimate as a percentage of the total has decreased from 1.6% to 1% over the same period. In the financial year 2024-25, an allocation of rupees 47,619 crores has been made, marking an 18% reduction from the revised estimates of 2023-24. (Ramachandra, 2024). The overall decrease in spending for higher education has been criticised by many educators. The proper implementation of the new education policy requires greater funds, especially with four four-year college attendance becoming mandatory, to compensate for which universities may need to increase their respective fees.

Hence it is imperative that more money is allocated to education to ensure good facilities and opportunities to all, rather than only those capable of affording

#### **Example of South Korea**

**Suneung**, the college scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) of Korea, is an eight hour long exam held every year in November. It is a university entrance exam taken by high school students and retakers wishing to score better. There are two types: Type Ga (natural sciences) and Type Na (Humanities) and the current system of CSAT was established in 1993. The test is highly competitive, with more than half a million students battling to secure seats in the top universities of Korea (The most prestigious universities being -SKY- an acronym for Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University). Some 70% of the exam takers go on to attend university, while only 2% are able to enter 'SKY'.

Students start preparing for these tests from a young age. 80% of all Korean students attend cram schools called Hagwons. This cram school industry is worth 20 billion dollars, a wave of 'celebrity teachers' have also emerged, a profession earning at least 4 million dollars each year.

Parents spend an exuberant amount of money for these private coaching institutions, in fact the tuition expenditure has reached an all-time high, with most households spending more percentage of their income on tutoring than food. South Koreans spent 27.1 trillion won (\$27.4 billion) on private education in 2023. This puts families under immense financial pressure and is a significant disadvantage for students unable to access such facilities due to financial problems. In Korea rural students remain behind Urban students due to the lack of infrastructure and support available to them. This high cost of sending children to college is seen as one of the reasons for the declining fertility rates in Korea. Parents prefer to spend more resources on one

child rather than divide it between many.

Students are being taught to prepare for a test. This teaching style dictated by rote learning is detrimental to the holistic development of a child. It is necessary to give importance to learning-based critical thinking, skill building and soft skills. Students need to be prepared for a future beyond textbooks and exams.

Sunung is a make-it-or-break-it test in South Korea, achieving a high score and admittance to a top college is the only way out of poverty for many. Korean society puts great emphasis on education. For them this test is a barometer of a person's life, a mis-attempt is as life-ruining mistake in their eyes. Excellence in this test is seen as the best way for a person to elevate their social standing in society. Due to these expectations, students are understandably put under great pressure to perform well. A saying in Korea perfectly encapsulates this...

*Sleep 3 hours, you have a chance to enter SKY schools*

*Sleep 4 hours, you can get into other universities*

*Sleep 5 hours, don't dream of going to college*

Reports show that some 68% of students in Korea reported taking additional lessons in science and about 89% take additional mathematics lessons. On average, students take two hours of additional science lessons and five hours of mathematics lessons besides regular instruction.

More than one in two students reported that they take additional lessons to improve their grades (51% in 22 OECD countries with comparable data), while only 13% reported that their parents wanted them to attend such lessons (30% in 22 countries with comparable data). Korean students reported that they have been taking additional instruction for six years prior to the PISA test.

This is the longest time among the 22 countries with comparable data (Programme for International Student Assessment, 2015).

South Korea ranks nearly in the top for raising the unhappiest children. One in three high school students report having suicidal thoughts due to academic pressure and anxiety. Suicide has been the number one cause of death in South Korea since 2007. It was reported that in 2019 there were 24.6 suicides for every 100,000 people in South Korea, the highest among developed nations.

### **Questionnaire for**

**I. For students**

1. Which board (CBSE/ISC/IB)

2. Have you taken the exam yet?

- Yes
- No, and I don't plan to
- No, but I plan to

3. Where are you planning on applying

- Only India
- Abroad
- Both abroad and in India

4. How much time did you/plan to give to CUET preparation? (per day)

- 1-3 hours
- 4-6 hours
- 6+ hours
- I don't intend to take the exam

5. Did you take /plan to take any external help for your preparation? (example-coaching)

- Yes
- No
- I didn't prepare for the exam

6. The frequency of the coaching (how long did you attend the coaching or plan to attend)?

- Throughout the year (1-2 days per week)
- Throughout the year (3-4 days a week)
- Throughout the year (5+ days a week)
- End-year crash course (last 1 month)
- End-year crash course (last 2-3 months)
- I didn't take any external help

7. How much time did you dedicate to your schoolwork, excluding the CUET preparation time and time spent in school? (per day)

- 1-3 hours
- 4-6 hours
- 6+ hours

8. Were you able to pursue extracurricular and leisure activities, if yes, then how much time? (per day, pre-exam season)

- No, no time (0 hours)
- Yes, Less than 1 hour
- Yes, 1-2 hours
- Yes, 3-4 hours
- Yes, 5+ hours
- Are you/were you preparing for any other competitive exam along with CUET preparation?
- Yes
- No
- If have already given the CUET, how did you feel about your timetable? Rate your stress levels from 1 to 10 (1 being no stress and 10 being extremely stressed)

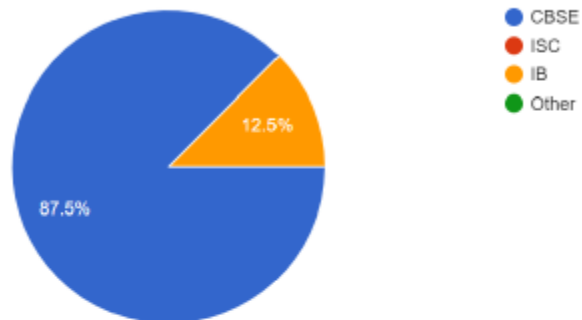
9. What are your thoughts on admissions depending more on CUET scores and lesser on grade 12 board results?

- Negatively
- Positively
- Neutrally (I am unaffected by this decision)
- No opinion
- Why do you feel so (positive/negative)? (open-ended question)
- Negative-Less convenient
- Negative-More stressful
- Negative-unfair - please elaborate
- Negative-other reason
- Positive- I feel it has made the process fairer
- Positive- It has reduced academic pressure
- Positive-other
- Both-please elaborate

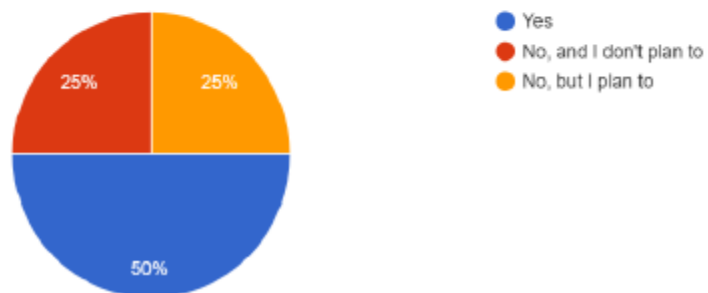


## Students' Results

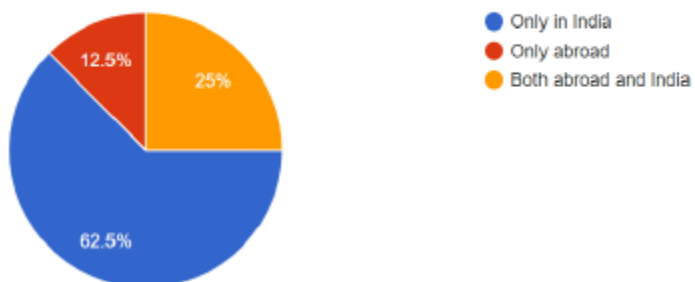
1. Which board student (CBSE/ISC/IB) are you?



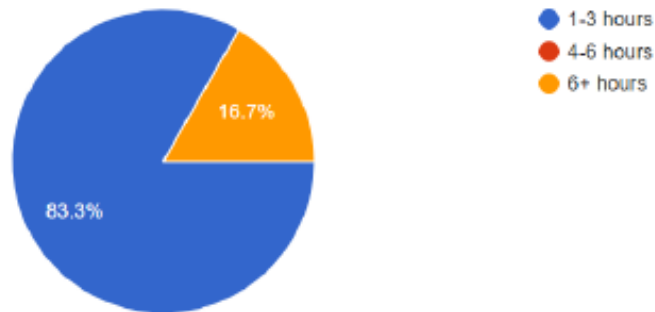
2. Have you taken the exam yet?



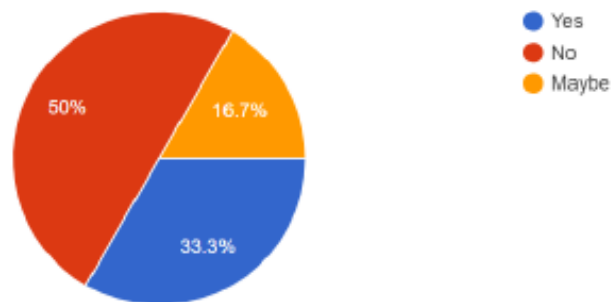
3. Where all are you planning on applying?



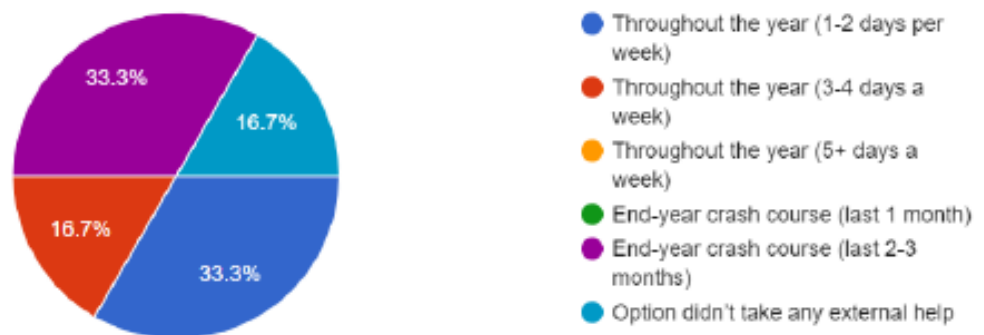
4. How much time did you/do you plan to give to CUET preparation? (per day)



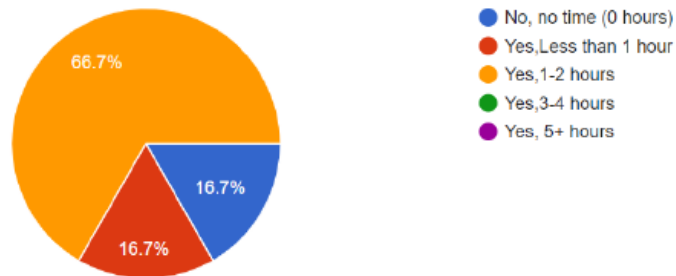
5. Did you take /do you plan to take any external help for your preparation? (example-coaching)



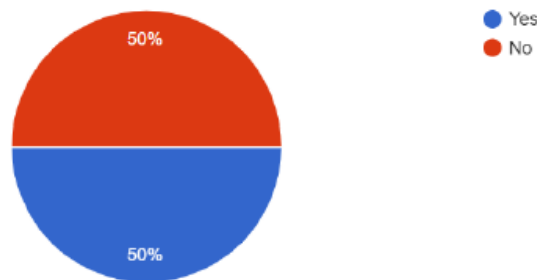
6. The times you attended (how long did you attend the coaching or plan to attend)?



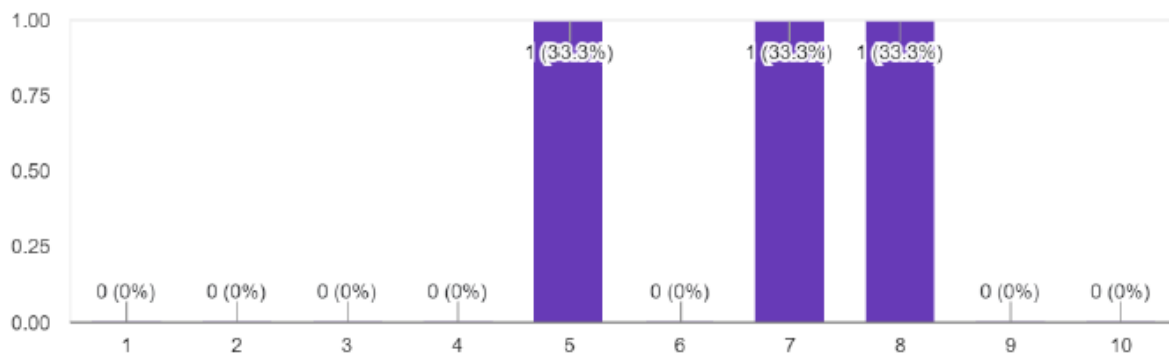
8. Were you/are you able to pursue extracurricular and leisure activities, if yes, then how much time? (per day, pre-exam season)



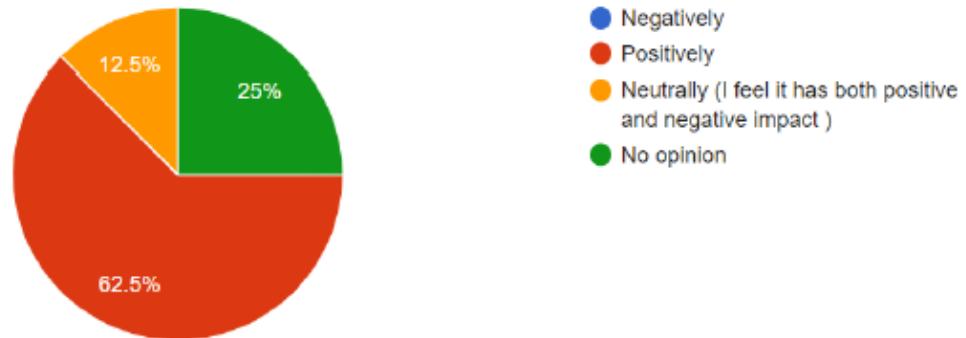
9. Are you/were you preparing for any other competitive exam along with CUET preparation?



10. If you have already given the CUET, how did you feel about your timetable? Rate your stress levels from 1 to 10 (1 being no stress and 10 being extremely stressed)



11. What are your thoughts on admissions depending more on CUET scores and lesser on grade 12 board results?



## II. For professors

1. Since how many years have you been a professor?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years

2. What are your opinions on CUET?

- Negative
- Positive
- Neutral (neither negative nor positive)
- No opinion

3. Could you please elaborate on your stance?

- Positive- I feel it has made the process fairer
- Positive- It has reduced the stress faced by children
- Positive-other
- Negative- It has had the opposite impact on children ( has made applying for universities in India more stressful
- Negative- It has made the process more unfair
- Negative-other

- Neutral-other
- No opinion

4. Do you think the CUET exam is an accurate measure of a child's aptitude?

- No
- Yes
- Undecided
- Somewhat

5. Do you think there are chances of CUET exams becoming the sole arbitrator for future college admissions?

- Yes, very likely
- Yes, Likely
- Probably
- No, not likely at all
- No, not possible

6. Please elaborate on your stance.

7. Do you think CUET is the way forward?

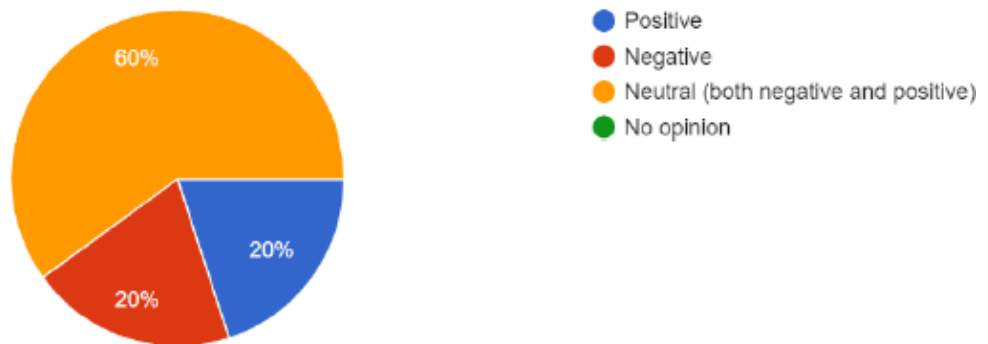
- Yes
- No
- Neutral (it can be both)
- No opinion

### **Professors Results**

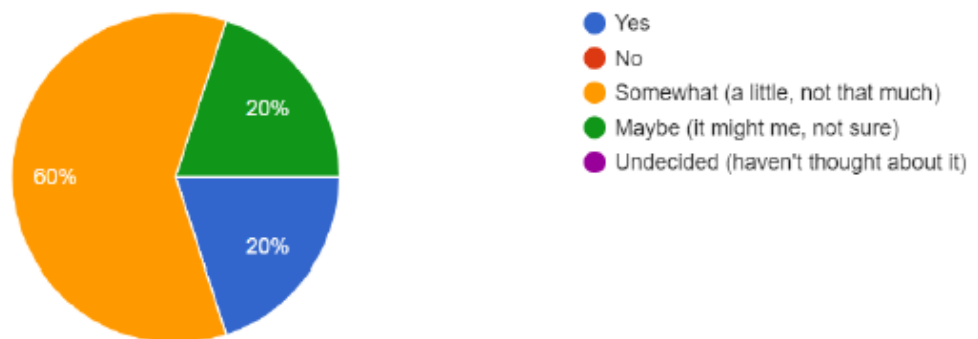
1. Since how many years have you been a University teacher?



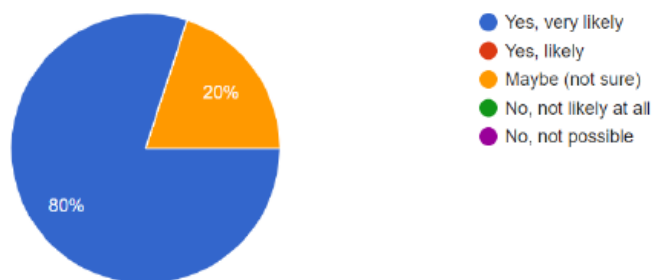
2. What are your opinions on CUET?



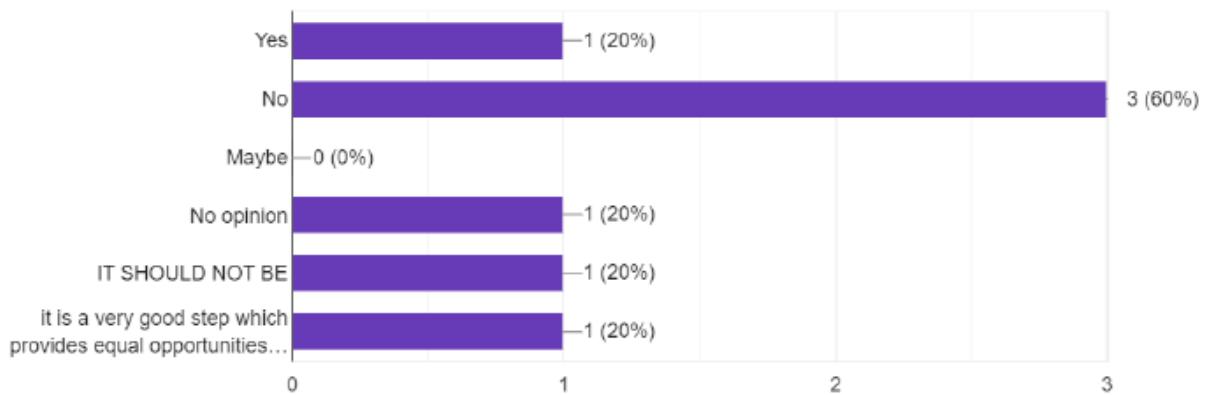
3. Do you think the CUET exam is an accurate measure of a child's aptitude?



4. Do you think there are chances of CUET exams becoming the sole criteria for future college admissions?



5. Do you think CUET is the way forward? (please select your answer and then elaborate your stance using the other option available)



### Observations and Conclusion

1. Students who are going to take it only once have a nearsighted view while the professors who have a more farsighted view. The first batch of students who have given CUET and students' who wish to give it see it as a positive change and welcome it. Whereas professors looking at it with a more farsighted perspective seem sceptical of the future implications the exam may have.
2. Most professors don't consider CUET to be an adequate assessment of a child's aptitude, although there seems to be a general consensus on it making the admission process more fair.
3. 60 per cent of the professors interviewed don't consider CUET to be the way forward and 80 per cent foresee it becoming the sole criteria for admissions.
4. One major objective of CUET is to help reduce academic pressure and stress placed upon students, With 55 per cent of students (having appeared) still reporting to have experienced high levels of stress, CUET's effectiveness remains questionable.
5. The overall opinion on CUET is neutral. Most of the responders agree on it having both negative and positive results. The future of CUET remains a concern for many. This form of centralised examination is still in its early stages and hence the future path it takes is uncertain.

To conclude, although the steps taken by the National Educational Council are necessary to

ensure that the higher education system remains a system based on merit and capability rather than other differentiators, various policies and laws still need to be formulated to ensure the creation of a fair and ideal system. Bringing in centralised examinations and increasing the coaching age for students are some of the steps, but an adequate solution to the problems would require taking into account the financial constraints of students, the importance of skill-based learning, vocational training as well as holistic growth of a child. These steps need to be supplemented by greater investment into education and job creation schemes and reeling in the ever-expanding coaching industry. CUET may have its positives and negatives, but it remains a step towards change.

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