

EXAMS IN A PANDEMIC?

University Examinations in
the times of COVID - 19

A feasibility analysis

AUG
2020

WHITE PAPER

By fellows of the All India Professional's Congress, Delhi

BACKGROUND

Overview & Objective

OBJECTIONS

Legacy, Infrastructure

RECOMMENDATIONS

For a post-COVID World

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Acknowledgments

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Author

*Roshan Santhalia,
ROO, North Zone*

Editors

*Aalim Javeri
COO, AIPC*

*Amitabh Dubey,
Policy Co-Ordinator India*

*Ashish Srivastava
Co-ordinator, AIPC Delhi*

*Avani Bansal
Secretary, AIPC Delhi*

*Kunal Vajani
Fellow, AIPC South Delhi*

*Varun Chopra
VP, AIPC Delhi Central*

*Yogesh Sachdeva,
President, AIPC Delhi*

Design

*Divya Sharma
Graphics Designer, Delhi*

*Vijay Raj Singh
AIPC Policy Division,
Delhi State*

Foreword

The decision of the University Grants Commission (UGC), which regulates all universities in India, has shown haste in taking the decision that all examinations of universities have to be completed by 30th of September.

At a time when most organs of government have remained closed or non-functional due to the COVID-19 impact, the UGC decision lacks empathy and seriousness. Ignoring the advice of experts as well as appeals from students, the UGC insists on a process that is likely to be iniquitous and detrimental to the interests of hundreds of thousands of students.

The entire idea of an examination is to assess the learning outcome of the time the student has spent in an educational institution. During the current crisis, that objective will not be met in spirit owing to lockdowns around the country. Unfortunately, the education system zealously pursues the objective of maximizing the number of students who qualify examinations with the highest possible marks. Perhaps this is a way for the UGC and those in charge of the country's education system to carry on with their work, show that the system is working, and the results of examinations will reflect the reality of student achievement. Unfortunately, international experience indicates that people are differently impacted by this crisis. This is not normal, no matter how routine the UGC's approach may be.

The UGC should have come up with more imaginative solutions during such a unique and widespread crisis that has caused unprecedented social, economic and mental stress in society. Surveys and data clearly show that internet connectivity and access to smartphones and computers is uneven. Equity and fairness are important ingredients of public policy, something that UGC appears to have forgotten.

Students in order to bring out their best need to face examinations in a conducive atmosphere without undue stress, strain or constraints. An expert panel organized by the Delhi unit of All India Professionals Congress (AIPC) also suggested that the time and circumstances to conduct exams is not right and these should be deferred to a later date or an alternative mechanism based on students' past performance can be taken for promotion.

I congratulate the AIPC Delhi team for investigating this matter in depth and special thanks to Roshan Santhalia, Regional Operations Officer (North Zone) for spearheading this initiative.



Salman Anees Soz
Deputy Chairman
Regional Co-Ordinator (North)
All India Professional's Congress

The All India Professionals Congress (AIPC) is an organisation within the Indian National Congress launched in August 2017 under the able guidance and leadership of Dr. Shashi Tharoor. The organisation is structured on a rotary model where the states have chapter like divisions which form separate working units. These chapters consist of professionals like doctors, engineers, chartered accountants, lawyers, environmentalists, entrepreneurs, or any other tax paying individual. The state units and the chapters routinely conduct work in the field of research, policy, ground level activities etc. thereby contributing to the overall development of the society around these units. AIPC Delhi is the state unit of Delhi and has as many as 6 active chapters within its jurisdiction. These chapters are AIPC Delhi North, AIPC Delhi East, AIPC Delhi South, AIPC Delhi South 2, AIPC Delhi West and AIPC New Delhi.

Covid- 19 has affected almost everyone living in India and in most countries abroad. However, some people have found themselves in muddy waters more than the others. University students are one such category of the citizens of our country who have been worst affected due to the onset of Covid – 19. Covid – 19 is a highly contagious and fatal virus which has originated from Wuhan, China and has paralysed the routine functioning of most of the countries of our planet. The virus has ensured that people mostly work and conduct their daily lives from the confines of their homes and maintain physical distancing to ensure that the virus is not passed on from one person to another.

The universities in India have been left with no choice but to prohibit any physical classes where students can come together in a classroom and benefit from a lecture. As a natural corollary, the universities have also been grappling with the question of how exactly they can conduct the semester or annual exams for the purposes of assessment and promotion of the students of the universities across India. A lot of indecision, inconsistency and confusion still prevails across the universities of India as different universities and different state governments have taken different recourse towards addressing this problem.

This White Paper is being developed in pursuance of the thoughts and suggestions discussed during the webinar/online session of around 90 minutes which was conducted on 17th July 2020. The webinar was conducted by AIPC Delhi on the topic “Exams in a pandemic? University Examinations during Covid – 19, a feasibility analysis”. The webinar was graced by erudite speakers like Shri Kapil Sibal (former Union Minister for HRD and present Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha), Mr. Sukhadeo Thorat (Professor Emeritus, JNU & Former Chairperson UGC), Lt. Gen. Zameer Uddin Shah, PVSM, SM, VSM (former Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University) and Neeraj Kundan (National President, National Students Union of India). Some extremely interesting ideas were floated during the course of this session. The ground level problems of the students were discussed threadbare and some possible alternative solutions were proposed during this session.

This White Paper has been written with the objective of going one step further from the webinar conducted on 17th July 2020. The fellows of AIPC Delhi have researched extensively on the subject and written this White Paper for the benefit of the concerned stakeholders, professors, students and the public at large. The broader concept on which this White Paper is premised is to highlight the terrible condition which the students of the universities of India have been suffering due to the actions and omissions of the Union of India and the University Grants Commission (UGC). In the end, the White Paper also proposes some recommendations to the UGC, Union of India and the other concerned stakeholders.

Executive Summary

This White Paper attempts to deal with the grave crisis which has been caused due to the Covid – 19 pandemic in the lives of the University students, more specifically, the lives of the final year University students pursuing the undergraduate and post graduate courses from the Central, State and Private universities of our country. Owing to the nature of the pandemic, it is now clear that conventional physical examinations for the students of the Universities is not possible. Some questions which begs an answer are that what is the alternative? Whether the alternative of holding online examinations for the students of Universities is a feasible option? Whether holding online examinations for the students of the Universities would be fair and equitable for all the students? Whether holding online examinations would be practically possible for all those students who have left University towns/cities for their native place? This White Paper attempts to answer some of these questions and goes on to propose some recommendations in the end.

It is settled position of law that the guidelines issued by the Universities Grant Commission (UGC) are mandatory and binding on Central, State and Private universities. UGC issued the detailed guidelines on 29 April 2020 which was titled as "UGC Guidelines on Examinations and Academic Calendar for the Universities in View of COVID-19 Pandemic and Subsequent Lockdown"[1]. The UGC issued "Revised Guidelines" through its press release dated 6 July 2020 through which it was mandated that the terminal semester(s)/ final year(s) examinations to be conducted by the Universities/institutions by the end of September 2020 in offline (pen & paper)/online/blended (online + offline) mode. The notification also clarified that in case a student of terminal semester/ final year is unable to appear in the examination conducted by the University for whatsoever the reason(s) may be, he/she may be given opportunity to appear in special examinations for such course(s)/ paper(s), which may be conducted by the university as and when feasible, so that the student is not put to any inconvenience/ disadvantage. The guidelines regarding intermediate semester/year examination, as notified on 29 April 2020 were confirmed to remain unchanged.[2]

Thousands of students came out in the open and protested against the above-mentioned guidelines issued by the UGC. The students expressed their views through various mediums of print and social media where they explained the kind of problems they would face if online exams or a mix of online and offline exams are conducted by their respective Universities. The major issues flagged by the students were those relating to inaccessibility of quality computer hardware and internet connectivity, lack of study material at their native places, mental stress due to Covid – 19 crisis etc, unfair and arbitrary advantage for the middle and upper middle class students etc. The failure of mock online exams conducted by the Universities and the issues which arose during the course of such mock exams was also highlighted by the students.

The UGC while issuing the above mentioned guidelines has also failed to appreciate the lack of adequate IT infrastructure with University students in India. As per a survey conducted by the Delhi University Teachers Association, over 85 percent students said that they are not in favor of the Online Open Book Examination (OBE). The survey found that around 33.7 percent of the Delhi University students were not able to attend online classes though Google Meet, Zoom or any other application and around 38 percent students in DU have not been able to access reading material online, even if it been provided to them[3].

[1] UGC Guidelines dated 29th April 2020 available in the public domain.

[2] UGC Press Release dated 6 July 2020 available in the public domain.

[3] "From DU to JNTU, Why Students All Over Are Opposing College Exams", The Quint, 25 July 2020.

Executive Summary

The UGC has also failed to appreciate the overall quality of the Indian IT infrastructure and connectivity across the country. The “QS I-GAUGE Further Academic Interest Report (FAIR) 2020” survey has revealed some important data that can prove to be decisive in studying whether India is ready to embrace the concept of online learning in its entirety. Introducing some preliminary data from the survey, a total of 7594 students from across the country except for the region of Andaman and Nicobar had responded to the survey. Among the respondents were, 62.16% male, 37.82% female and 0.02% transgender. The respondents were fairly heterogeneous in terms of their age group wherein 74.33% belonged to the age group of 18-22 years, 18.32% to 22-27 years, 4.91% to 16-18 years and 2.43% were above the age of 27 years. With respect to respondents who experienced scarce access to Internet connectivity and used no one particular source, 53.49% faced poor connectivity, and 46.51% faced signal issues. Amongst the ones who used WiFi dongle, 43.30% faced poor connectivity, 9.23% faced power issues and 47.47% faced signal issues. This data clearly shows that majority of the connectivity issues take place in the form of either poor connectivity or network issues.[4]

Even the University professors/teachers are thinking alike on the idea of conducting online examinations during the current Covid 19 crisis. Various teacher / professor associations and leading professors (in their individual capacities) have come out in the open and supported the demands made by the University students to not conduct online examinations. The UGC seems to have taken such an inflexible, extreme and adamant position that the unison voice of both the student community and the teacher/professor community is also not being paid any heed to. The teachers/professors have on various occasions in the past few months advocated for the promotion and assessment of the University students on the basis of past performance and internal assessments.

The White Paper then goes on to deal with some of the counter viewpoints as advocated by the UGC in support of conducting online (or offline + online) written examinations. The UGC has argued that the legitimacy of the University degree shall be degraded in the employment markets if the written examinations have not been conducted. Furthermore, the UGC has also argued that Covid – 19 is here to stay and is not going anywhere, hence, at some point the University students would have to accept the “new normal”. These points have been discussed and countered in Chapter 8 of this White Paper. Chapter 9 of the White Paper finally provides some recommendations to the UGC and the other stakeholders by way of which a relatively balanced decision can be taken which addresses the various issues raised by the students and Professors of the Indian Universities and at the same time allows for an evaluation/assessment of the merits of the students.

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[4] "Covid - 19, A wake up call for Indian Internet Service Providers", By QS I Gauge, 20 April 2020,

Background & Context

Covid – 19 has turned out to be one of the worst human crises of the 21st century. The lethal and highly contagious virus has disturbed almost everyone around the globe. By mid – March, nearly 75 countries had implemented or announced closure of educational institutions. As on 10th March, school and university closures globally due to the COVID-19 had left one in five students out of school. According to UNESCO, by the end of April 2020, 186 countries had implemented nationwide closures, affecting about 74% of the total enrolled learners.[1]

The Union of India and the state governments have addressed various different sections of the Indian society who have been affected severely due to the Covid – 19 crisis. For instance, the businesses and industries who have taken bank loans have been given a mandatory moratorium period within which the banks would not be allowed to recover from these borrowers any principal sum of money lent to them. Food, basic utilities and other basic amenities have also been provided by the Union of India or the respective state government to those citizens in need, due to the unprecedented pandemic which has caused havoc in the lives of Indian citizens.

One class of citizens i.e. the students of the Indian universities has been disproportionately impacted due to the Covid – 19 crisis. Hence, it is only logical and obvious that the appropriate government takes into account the unique problems which the pandemic has created for the university students. With the highly contagious virus i.e. Covid – 19 multiplying and spreading at a fast rate, conducting physical exams at college centers is just not an option anymore. Therefore, the Hobson's choice left with the Union of India and UGC is to either assess and promote the university students on the basis of their past scores and internal assessments, or, conduct a remote online examination for the students by the use of technology and internet. Given the overall quality of internet in India and access to electronic resources by the university students, especially in towns and villages beyond the top tier cities, it should not have been a very difficult choice for the Union of India or UGC to advise the universities to assess and promote the students on the basis of internal assessments and past record. However, the Union of India acting through the UGC has taken a completely contrary stand and advocated online examinations for the students of the university.

It seems that owing to the sudden and unprecedented crisis, the UGC and the Union of India have not been able to maintain a well thought out and practical perspective in answering to the problems which are being thrown up due to the pandemic. The decision of conducting a mandatory online / offline exam (or a hybrid of the two) for the students of the final year/terminal semester across all universities of India is far from being practical or reasonable given the current circumstances. It is common knowledge now that most students living and studying in cities have returned to their respective towns/villages due to the nationwide lockdown imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2020. Another reason for the students to return to their home town/village was the uncertain nature of the pandemic and no tentative date by which it may end. A vast majority of these students come from the poor strata of our society and do not have access to appropriate computer hardware and high-speed internet which could allow them to take online exams.[2]

[1] Students Perception and Preference for Online Education in India during Covid - 19 Pandemic", Muthuprasad, Aiswarya S, Aditya KS and Girish K Jha, 12 May 2020.

2] "From DU to JNTU, Why Students All Over Are Opposing College Exams", The Quint, 25 July 2020.

Background & Context

Most of these students have also not carried their books and study material to their villages / towns. [3] It is clear that the UGC and Union of India have taken a decision which is oblivious to the ground realities and problems being faced by the university students. The Union of India or the UGC have shown scant respect to the “Right to Equality” which is a fundamental right enshrined by the Constitution of India under Article 14. In an online exam format, the students who will have access to the best of computers/laptops and internet connection would be unfairly placed in an advantageous position vis a vis the poor and marginal sections of the society who do not have similar access.

There are numerous other ways to assess and promote the students of a university. The Union of India and the UGC have taken a rigid stand on conducting of online / offline exams. Some of the autonomous institutes like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and state-run National Law Universities (NLU) have already cancelled their exams. These institutes are full of erudite academicians on their executive & examination committees and hence, it will only be apt to learn from the decisions made by some of these institutes in assessing the students through alternative ways than by conducting online/offline written exams in the present day like situation. This White Paper is premised on the central argument that this choice of the UGC is erroneous and severely problematic because it shall have highly negative repercussions on the university students and shall impinge on their fundamental rights to equality and fair opportunity as citizens of India.

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[3] “Student lives matter: DU students say no to exams amid Covid-19”, Hindustan Times, 16 July 2020,

University Grants Commission

POWERS AND ROLE OF UGC IN REGULATING THE EXAMINATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITIES ACROSS INDIA

The Constitution of India provides the power to the Union of India under Schedule 7, List I, Entry 66 for matters relating to “Co-ordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions.” In pursuance of the above entry, the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 has been enacted.

The preamble of the Act provides:

“An Act to make provision for the co-ordination and determination of standards in Universities and for that purpose, to establish a University Grants Commission.”

The mandate of the UGC (as per their website) is:

- a) providing funds, and
- b) coordination, determination and maintenance of standards in institution of higher education.

Section 2 (f) provides the following definition of ‘University’:

“University” means a University established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, Provincial Act or a State Act, and includes any such institution as may, in consultation with the University concerned, be recognized by the Commission in accordance with the regulations made in this behalf under this Act.”

Section 3, its marginal note being ‘Application of Act to institutions for higher studies other than universities’, provides:

“The Central Government may, on the advice of the Commission, declare by notification in the Official Gazette, that any institution for higher education, other than a University, shall be deemed to be a University for the purposes of this Act, and on such a declaration being made, all the provisions of this Act shall apply to such institution as if it were a University within the meaning of clause (f) of section 2.”

The preceding two paragraphs make it clear that no matter which university - be it a central university or a state university or a deemed to be university - the UGC Act applies to all kinds of universities. What is referred to as private universities in common parlance have not been particularly defined under the Act. However, the University Grants Commission (Establishment of and Maintenance of Standards in Private Universities) Regulations, 2003 in clause 2.1 define ‘private university’ as:

“A university duly established through a State / Central Act by a sponsoring body viz. a Society registered under the Societies Registration Act 1860, or any other corresponding law for the time being in force in a State or a Public Trust or a Company registered under Section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956.”

University Grants Commission

Hence, private universities, as per the law, constitute a sub-set of Central or State Universities as defined in Section 2(f) of the Act. What is referred to as a private university in layman terms is usually either a private university or a deemed to be university under the law.

Therefore, it can be concluded that as per the Act, the UGC has the authority to regulate all universities in India.

Section 12 of the Act details the functions of the UGC as follows:

“It shall be the general duty of the Commission to take, in consultation with the Universities or other bodies concerned, all such steps as it may think fit for the promotion and co ordination of University education and for the determination and maintenance of standards of teaching, examination and research in Universities, and for the purpose of performing its functions under this Act, the Commission may-

...

(d) recommend to any University the measures necessary for the improvement of University education and advise the University upon the action to be taken for the purpose of implementing such recommendation;

...

(j) perform such other functions as may be prescribed or as may be deemed necessary by the Commission for advancing the cause of higher education in India or as may be incidental or conducive to the discharge of the above functions.”

Section 12A confers the authority on the UGC to regulate fees and prohibit donations in certain cases. Section 13 gives the authority to inspect universities with respect to various aspects. Furthermore, Section 14 provides that the primary consequence of failure of universities to comply with the recommendations/regulations of the UGC would be withholding of grant proposed to be made to such universities out of the Fund of the UGC.

Section 26 of the Act confers the authority on the UGC to make regulations, inter alia, concerning the following matters:

“...

(d) specifying the institutions or class of institutions which may be recognised by the Commission under clause (f) of sub-section 2;

(e) defining the qualifications that should ordinarily be required of any person to be appointed to the teaching staff of the University, having regard to the branch of education in which he is expected to give instruction;

(f) defining the minimum standards of instruction for the grant of any degree by any University;

(g) regulating the maintenance of standards and the co-ordination of work or facilities in Universities...”

University Grants Commission

As per **Section 28**, regulations made by the UGC have to be approved by the Parliament. An analysis of the above provisions shows that the UGC has the authority to regulate universities on a wide array of matters.

The Supreme Court in *Annamalai University v. Information & Tourism Dept.*[1] observed the following:

“42. The provisions of the UGC Act are binding on all universities whether conventional or open. Its powers are very broad. The Regulations framed by it in terms of clauses (e), (f), (g) and (h) of sub-section (1) of Section 26 are of wide amplitude. They apply equally to open universities as also to formal conventional universities. In the matter of higher education, it is necessary to maintain minimum standards of instructions. Such minimum standards of instructions are required to be defined by UGC. The standards and the coordination of work or facilities in universities must be maintained and for that purpose required to be regulated. The powers of UGC under Sections 26(1)(f) and 26(1)(g) are very broad in nature. Subordinate legislation as is well known when validly made becomes part of the Act.”

Hence, it can be concluded that the UGC regulations or guidelines are binding on all universities unless they are directory in nature. A perusal of the judgments of the Supreme Court concerning the authority of the UGC evinces that the conflict often arises with respect to the authority of the UGC qua the state universities, especially the regulation of conditions of employment in the state universities.

The Hon'ble Supreme Court in *Prof. Yashpal v. State of Chhattisgarh*[2] observed the following:

“Though incorporation of a university as a legislative head is a State subject (Entry 32 List II) but basically a university is an institution for higher education and research. Entry 66 of List I is coordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions. There can thus be a clash between the powers of the State and that of the Union... Items 63 to 66 of List I are carved out of the subject of education and in respect of these items the power to legislate is vested exclusively in Parliament. The use of the expression “subject to” ... clearly indicates that the legislation in respect of excluded matters cannot be undertaken by the State Legislatures... The consistent and settled view of this Court, therefore, is that in spite of incorporation of universities as a legislative head being in the State List, the whole gamut of the university which will include teaching, quality of education being imparted, curriculum, standard of examination and evaluation and also research activity being carried on will not come within the purview of the State Legislature on account of a specific entry on coordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical education being in the Union List for which Parliament alone is competent. It is the responsibility of Parliament to ensure that proper standards are maintained in institutions for higher education or research throughout the country and also uniformity in standards is maintained.”

[1] (2009) 4, SCC 590

[2] (2005) 5, SCC 420

University Grants Commission

Similarly, the Court in *Kalyani Mathivanan v. K.V. Jeyaraj*[3] observed that to the extent the State legislation is in conflict with the Central legislation, including subordinate legislation, made by the Central legislation under Entry 25 of the Concurrent List, the State Legislation shall be repugnant to the Central legislation and would be inoperative. The UGC Regulations being subordinate legislation under the Act of Parliament can override the primary legislation enacted by the State Legislature.

However, the UGC does not have an unbridled authority to regulate conditions of employment in the state universities. The Court in *Jagdish Prasad v. State of Bihar*[4] observed the following:

“70. The authority of the Commission to frame regulations with regard to the service conditions of teachers in the Centrally funded educational institutions is equally well established. As has been very rightly done in the instant case, the acceptance of the Scheme in its composite form has been left to the discretion of the State Governments. The concern of the State Governments and their authorities that UGC has no authority to impose any conditions with regard to its educational institutions is clearly unfounded. There is no doubt that the Regulations framed by UGC relate to Schedule VII List I Entry 66 to the Constitution, but it does not empower the Commission to alter any of the terms and conditions of the enactments by the States under Article 309 of the Constitution. Under List III Entry 25, the State is entitled to enact its own laws with regard to the service conditions of the teachers and other staff of the universities and colleges within the State and the same will have effect unless they are repugnant to any Central legislation.”

The University Grants Commission (Minimum Standards of Instruction for the Grant of the First Degree through Formal Education) Regulations, 2003 contain the following relevant clauses:

“1.2 These shall apply to all universities established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, a Provincial Act, or a State/Union Territory Act, and all institutions recognized by or affiliated to such universities and all institutions deemed to be universities under Section 3 of the UGC Act 1956.

...
6.1 The university shall adopt the guidelines issued by the UGC and other statutory bodies concerned from time to time in respect of conduct of examinations.”

The University Grants Commission (the minimum standards of instructions for the grant of the first degree through nonformal/distance education in the faculties of Arts, Humanities, Fine Arts, Music, Social Sciences, Commerce and Sciences) Regulations, 1985 contain the following relevant clauses:

“2. They shall apply to every university established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, Provincial Act or of a Section 2 of the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 and every institution deemed to be University under Section 3 of the said Act.

...
4.1. The University shall adopt the guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission from time to time in regard to the conduct of examinations.”

[3] (2015) 6, SCC 363

[4] (2013) 8, SCC 633

University Grants Commission

The University Grants Commission (Minimum Standards of Instruction for the Grant of the Master's Degree through Formal Education) Regulations, 2003 contain the following relevant clauses:

“1.2 These shall apply to all universities established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, a Provincial Act, or a State/Union Territory Act, and all institutions recognized by or affiliated to such universities and all institutions deemed to be universities under Section 3 of the UGC Act 1956.

...

6.1 The university shall adopt the guidelines issued by the UGC and other statutory bodies concerned from time to time in respect of conduct of examinations.”

The UGC [Institutions Deemed to be Universities] Regulations, 2016 contain the following relevant clauses:

“1.2 These Regulations shall apply to every institution seeking declaration as an institution deemed to be university under the Act as also, albeit prospectively, to an institution which has been declared as an institution deemed to be university under Section 3 of the UGC Act, 1956.

...

21.0 Rules of the institution deemed to be university: Subject to the provisions of the Regulations and the Rules of the Commission, the Board of Management shall, in addition to all other powers vested in it, have the power to frame the Rules of the institution deemed to be university that may provide for all or any of the following matters: -

(vi) conduct of examinations, appointment of examiners and approval and publication of results thereof...”

A prima facie perusal of the above-mentioned regulations shows that the UGC has the authority to regulate the conduct of examinations of UG/PG courses in universities and can issue directions from time to time. These directions would be binding on all kinds of universities imparting higher education in India. Therefore, the best case scenario for the students of the universities across India would be that the UGC reconsiders its stand and becomes flexible on conducting online exams for the students of the universities. However, in case the UGC and the Union of India do not consider the genuine problems of the students of the country, then the State Government may have to explore its powers under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 which provides the State Governments the power to issue orders/directions during times of a “disaster” in order to uphold the larger public interest notwithstanding any other law which would most certainly include the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 and the regulations passed under the same.

University Grants Commission

NOTIFICATIONS/GUIDELINES ISSUED BY THE UGC IN RE: THE UNIVERSITY EXAMINATIONS POST 23 MARCH 2020

UGC issued the first substantive press release on 25 April 2020 in relation to university examinations during the Covid crisis. This press release clearly mentioned that UGC had constituted two committees to look into the problems being faced by the universities and colleges regarding teaching-learning processes, examinations, admissions, academic calendar and other related issues in view of the COVID-19 pandemic and country wide lockdown, to avoid academic loss and take appropriate measures for the future of students. The first committee was constituted under the chairmanship of Prof. RC Kuhad, former member of UGC and Vice Chancellor, Central University of Haryana. He was given the responsibility to look into the issues related to examinations and the academic calendar.

The UGC also clarified in this press release dated 25 April 2020 that that RC Kuhad led committee had submitted its report on 24th April, 2020 to UGC. It was promised by the UGC that this report will be discussed in the UGC Commission meeting and based on the decision of the Commission, UGC will issue Guidelines/Advisories, in the month of May to the universities and Colleges regarding the measures to be taken for the current academic session as well as next academic session in the larger interest of the student community.[5]

UGC issued the detailed guidelines on 29 April 2020 which was titled as "UGC Guidelines on Examinations and Academic Calendar for the Universities in View of COVID-19 Pandemic and Subsequent Lockdown"[6]. The relevant guidelines concerning the examinations for university students were as follows:

“3. The universities may conduct Terminal / Intermediate Semester / Year examinations in offline / online mode, as per their Ordinances/ Rules and Regulations, Scheme of Examinations, observing the guidelines of “social distancing” and keeping in view the support system available with them and ensuring fair opportunity to all students.

4. Terminal semester / year examinations for PG/ UG courses/ programmes may be conducted by universities as suggested in the academic calendar keeping in mind the protocols of “social distancing”.

5. For intermediate semester/year students, the universities may conduct examinations, after making a comprehensive assessment of their level of preparedness, residential status of the students, status of COVID-19 pandemic spread in different region / state and other factors.

[5] UGC Press Release dated 25th April 2020 available in the public domain.

[6] UGC Guidelines dated 29th April 2020 available in the public domain.

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In case the situation does not appear to be normal in view of COVID-19, in order to maintain “social distancing”, safety and health of the students, grading of the students could be composite of 50% marks on the basis of the pattern of internal evaluation adopted by the universities and the remaining 50% marks can be awarded on the basis of performance in previous semester only (if available). The internal evaluation can be continuous evaluation, prelims, mid-semester, internal assignments or whatever name is given for student progression. In the situations where previous semester or previous year marks are not available, particularly in the first year of annual pattern of examinations, 100% evaluation may be done on the basis of internal evaluation. If the student wishes to improve the grades, he/she may appear in special exams for such subjects during next semester.....

11. The universities may conduct the practical examinations and Viva-Voce Examinations through Skype or other meeting apps, and in case of intermediate semesters, the practical examinations may be conducted during the ensuing semesters.”

The UGC issued "Revised Guidelines" through its press release dated 6 July 2020 through which it was mandated that the terminal semester(s)/ final year(s) examinations to be conducted by the universities /institutions by the end of September 2020 in offline (pen & paper)/online/blended (online + offline) mode. The notification also clarified that in case a student of terminal semester/ final year is unable to appear in the examination conducted by the university for whatsoever the reason(s) may be, he/she may be given opportunity to appear in special examinations for such course(s)/ paper(s), which may be conducted by the university as and when feasible, so that the student is not put to any inconvenience/ disadvantage. The guidelines regarding intermediate semester/year examination, as notified on 29 April 2020 were confirmed to remain unchanged.[7]

The UGC issued notification dated 8th July 2020 through which it prescribed the "Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Conduct of Examinations".[8] This entailed Annexure I (Office Memorandum dated 6th July 2020 issued by Ministry of HRD, Union of India for conducting final term examinations) and Annexure II (Similar to the UGC notification dated 6 July 2020). The Annexure I i.e. Office Memorandum dated 6th July 2020 issued by Ministry of HRD, Union of India contain the following mandatory stipulations in re: compulsory conducting of university examinations:

“1. Final Term Examinations should be compulsorily conducted as per UGC Guidelines on Examinations and Academic Calendar for the Universities dated 29.04.2020 which have been again resolved today i.e. 06th July, 2020.

2. All examination may be conducted by 30th September. 2020.

3. Taking into consideration the academic interest of large number of students, MHA has agreed to the request of MHRD and granted exemption for the opening of educational institutions for the purpose of holding examinations/evaluation work for Final Term Examinations of the Universities/ Institutions.

4. MHRD has formulated detailed SOP for conduct of examinations with precautions to be taken in view of COVID - 19 situation. This has been vetted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.”

[7] UGC Press Release dated 6 July 2020 available in the public domain.

[8] UGC Press Release dated 8 July 2020 available in the public domain.

University Grants Commission

The UGC issued a press release dated 18 July 2020 in which it categorically mentioned that the universities were approached to enquire about the status of the conduct of the examinations as per the UGC notifications dated 6 July 2020 and 8 July 2020. The press release further mentioned that out of 945 universities (as per the list maintained by UGC till 01-06-2020) the responses were obtained from 755 universities (120 deemed universities, 274 private universities, 40 Central universities and 321 state universities).[9]

The press release mentioned that out of the 755 universities, 560 universities have either conducted the examination or are planning to conduct. The following details were provided in the press release:

- (i) 194 have already conducted examination (on-line/off-line);
- (ii) 366 are planning to conduct examination (on-line/off-line/blended mode) in August/September

Therefore, a bare perusal of the above mentioned shall clearly highlight that the stand of the Union of India acting through the Ministry of HRD and the UGC has been made absolutely clear vide the above-mentioned notifications and guidelines. Even after numerous representations and objections submitted by the professors, students and other concerned stakeholders, the Union of India and the UGC continue to take a rigid stand on the concerned subject. This approach of the Union of India and UGC has caused immense mental stress and harassment to the poor and marginalized students of our country who are still not able to come to terms with the decisions made by the UGC and the Union of India. The next two sections of this White Paper shall highlight some of the voices and concerns raised by the students and professors of the universities along with credible evidence to support their claims against online examinations.

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OBJECTIONS RAISED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TO THE PROPOSED GUIDELINES AS ISSUED BY THE UGC

The UGC has essentially mandated that the universities across the country need to conduct written examinations in some form or the other. The UGC has given the option to the universities for conducting physical (offline) examinations by maintaining appropriate social distancing or conduct online examinations through use of internet and appropriate technology. Both these options are severely problematic and have been challenged / objected to by the students of the universities in huge numbers. The Union of India and the UGC have given scant consideration to the safety, wellbeing and rights of the students of the university. The rigid and inflexible stand taken by the UGC is prima facie clear on the reading of the issued guidelines. This chapter of the White Paper intends to bring forth the concerns and voice of the students of the universities against the proposed exams as per the UGC guidelines.

LACK OF BOOKS AND STUDY MATERIAL

It is common knowledge that many university students left the cities to return to their home town/village on the announcement of the Lockdown on 23 March 2020. Students coming from the poor and marginalized sections of the society did not have adequate resources and rent paying capacity to withstand an indefinite lockdown. A majority of these students could not carry the books and study material back to their home town/village due to obvious reasons. The announcement of 23 March 2020 was sudden and hence, most of the citizens of our country who were not living in their home town/village had to make a quick decision and execute the same in a manner of haste. Hence, it is not surprising that a majority of these students missed taking the study material and relevant books back to their home town/village.

It has been more than 4 months since the lockdown was imposed on 23 March 2020, but, still the transport network across the country has not opened up. The UGC has simply not taken into account the plight of these students who just do not have the means or resources to study and prepare for the written exams.

It would be appropriate to quote one of the students of the Delhi University. Priyadarshini, a student of Hindu College, Delhi, said, "Students facing limitations due to their financial status are struggling. This binary in society cannot be ignored when students aren't able to access the resources due to poor internet facilities. Many don't even have their books or notes to prepare for the exams since they didn't think their mid-semester holiday would extend to a three-month break. Many are managing with limited or borrowed internet. This only adds to their stress." [1]

[1] "Pandemic fallout: Why online classes and exams are exclusionary", NewsLaundry, 18 May 2020,

Objections Raised

FAILED MOCK EXAMS

Some of the universities conducted online mock exams just to test the waters and see how feasible the option of conducting online exams are. The experiences of some of these students who took the mock exams paint a rather grim picture of the situation on the ground and once again enforces the central argument of this White Paper that the UGC has acted most arbitrarily by issuing mandatory guidelines to conduct written exams for the final semester students by the month of September 2020 through online/offline mode.

Case in point is the statement of Shubham KR Jaiswal made to the Hindustan Times: “DU has decided to postpone the exam yet again, and planning to conduct them in August now, but the recently conducted mock online exams was a flop show. The mock test was to give us a chance to get acquainted with the process of online, OBE exams. And it’s obvious that this is how DU plans to conduct exams later as well. But, the mock tests preceding the online exams were a failure. I joined the twitter trend against boycotting the final exams, #Studentslivesmatter and authorities must understand that”. Shubham KR Jaiswal is a final year student of B Com (Prog) at Ramanujan College.[2] Utkarsh Singh, a final year student of Hindi (Hons) at Satyawati College, who is in Uttar Pradesh at present, says, “Though we are at home, we know about the vandalism on campus and feel it’s done with the right intention to ensure that our plea doesn’t fall on deaf ears. We didn’t get any online class throughout the lockdown and were not even provided any study material! Many of us don’t have laptops, and now that monsoon has begun, many are facing power cuts as well... How do you expect us to give an online test then? I wasn’t able to even log in to the DU website to appear for the mock test. And if you talk about offline exams, then that’s more unbelievable! With Covid-19 cases increasing rapidly, how can I risk my health to travel from my village Amgaliyan and go back to Delhi to write an exam!”[3]

The newspaper report of as recent as 28 July 2020 reported in the Hindu quoted the example of Priyadarshini Bhagey, a student who complained that when she logged in for the mock exam around 3.30 PM, there was no question paper available. She said that she faced the problem for almost an hour before she wrote to the authorities. This newspaper report also quotes that another student who forgot his password was unable to reset it to access the portal despite double checking his entries multiple times, hence, getting logged out.[4]

In another newspaper report dated 30 July 2020, the Hindu reported that that journalism student took to the social media highlighting that though the mock exams were scheduled for Tuesday, when she logged in to the portal there was no question paper. This report also mentioned that Garima Guilia, a SOL student complained that her system was showing error when she tried to upload the PDFs of the answer sheet. As per her version she was not able to upload any answers.[5]

[2][3] “Student lives matter: DU students say no to exams amid Covid-19”, Hindustan Times, 16 July 2020,

[4] “Glitches mar DU online mock exams yet again”, The Hindu, 28 July 2020.

[5] “On day 2 of mock test students face issues again”, 30 July 2020, The Hindu.

Objections Raised

Quoting from another student of Delhi University, Himanshi Pandey stated to Hindustan Times that “Twitter trends, petitions, rap videos, and long social media posts express our state of mind. Mock exams were a trailer of what a film the online exams are going to be — We were supposed to upload documents of 5 MB but the site wasn’t even accepting two pages of a few KB,”. Himanshi Pandey, is a final year students of Hindi (Hons) at Miranda House. Furthermore, she added “Many of my classmates got the access to the question paper too late to even get enough time to write. And sabse zyada problem thi documents scan karne me because saare documents ek saath upload krne ka option nahi tha. Toh humko individually saari photos click kar ke ek ek kar ke upload karni padi. How can these problems be resolved in a span of few days for final online exams? And offline exams are out of question as our parents won’t allow us to travel amid the pandemic. Our future is at stake!”[6]

DETERIORATING MENTAL HEALTH OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DUE TO THE COVID – 19 CRISIS AND UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THEIR FUTURE

In the last 4 months, there have been many change of positions by the UGC and the universities across India on whether or not the university examinations should be conducted or not. This has only resulted in confusion amongst the minds of the university students especially the ones in their final years as their job prospects are directly contingent upon their receipt of the university degrees. The prospect of studying for the exams during this Covid – 19 crisis and giving it possibly on an absolutely alien platform i.e. the internet is something which has led to immense anxiety and mental stress for the poor and marginalized students of our country.

Students have expressed their disquietude over the uncertainty surrounding the status of examination mode and dates. Aaditya Singh, a student of the Delhi University mentions, “For students who choose to give offline exams in September, it’ll be so difficult to compete with students who would have given online OBE. Online exams are discriminatory in nature. In such circumstances, when the authorities aren’t helping us, what must we do to express our angst?”[7]

A double whammy has been foisted on 22-year-old Kai who is confined within the four walls of a quarantine centre in Manipur. Adding to the existing tribulations, this final-year engineering student at Hyderabad’s Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU) will have to travel back to the varsity to appear for final examination.[8]

In a survey of college students, data revealed that anxiety was common (Wheaton et al., 2012). The same study’s data reveals that health anxiety, contamination fears and disgust sensitivity were significant factors affecting swine-flu anxiety. Another study showed that 49.8% of students surveyed cited change of the environment they lived in as the biggest factor that impacted their mental status (Zhou et al., 2009). Also, a very recent study on the COVID situation in China showed that there is an immediate requirement for an emergency health system to pay attention to stress and psychological distress (Liu et al., 2020). Under such a situation, students were viewed as protective factors of post-catastrophic stress. Also, there were no differences observed in anxiety of diverse educational levels (Liu et al., 2020).[9]

[6] Ibid

[7] “Student lives matter: DU students say no to exams amid Covid-19”, Hindustan Times, 16 July 2020.

[8] “From DU to JNTU, Why Students All Over Are Opposing College Exams”, The Quint, 25 July 2020.

[9] “Education during pandemic: A study from a students’ perspective in India”, By Aditi Sawant, Adithya Balasubramanian and Badri G Narayanan, 27 May 2020.

Objections Raised

This above-mentioned survey also concluded the following which would be apt to be reproduced here:

“As per literature review and changed living conditions, we can expect severe psychological implications in students like anxiety and mental stress. Most students are living in sealed buildings or under self-quarantine. Added to this, a huge number of students (87%) replied that they are not in the right mindset to give examinations. Around 93% of parents are also against sending their children for examinations due to the prevalent situations. External factors like fear of safety to travel in public transports (95%) are influential sentiments that are seen to have psychological implications.”[10]

POPULAR CHOICE OF STUDENTS – BY NUMBERS

The university students are the most important stakeholders in the decision relating to the university examination. It can very well be argued that the university students are mature enough to be able to decide as to what is best for their future. Some of the brightest graduates from our country have done extremely well both within our country and abroad. These candidates have landed at some exceptional jobs straight out of the university owing to their skill set developed during the course of their education. It would be naïve to assume that the students of universities would want a cancellation of the examinations owing to their lack of interest in studying and preparing for the exams. The UGC should honor the opinion of the university students and should not foist upon them a decision which in the subjective opinion of UGC and the Union of India looks to be feasible on the face of it.

As per a survey by Maharashtra Students Union, which does not have apparent political affiliation, 93.1 per cent of 32,378 student respondents have favored cancellation of exams. Students under Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, RSS’s student wing, have opposed cancellation of exams. Congress, NCP and Shiv Sena student bodies have continued to support the state government’s stance of cancelling all exams.[11]

Some newspapers have reported that the Delhi University’s decision to conduct online exams saw overnight vandalism on the campus with roadside signages, bus stops, etc getting spray painted with protest slogans. It was also reported that an anonymous rap video was also circulated on social media by student political parties. Calling the rap video that’s being widely circulated as relatable, it was reported that the students are registering their defiance to online exams and are questioning the validity of attempting delayed offline exams. As per this newspaper report it was asserted that the rap video that’s circulating on social media is actually what the students are actually feeling.[12]

In an interesting survey conducted, the survey questionnaire received 6,320 total responses. Around 75% of the respondents were from the Indian state of Maharashtra while all states were represented in the survey response. Out of this, 37% of the students were from arts background, 35% from science background and the rest from commerce and management streams.

[10] Ibid

[11] “Explained: Why the jury is still out on holding final year college exams in Maharashtra”, Indian Express, 12 June 2020

[12] “Student lives matter: DU students say no to exams amid Covid-19”, Hindustan Times, 16 July 2020.

Objections Raised

As on 30th of April 2020, Maharashtra was the worst hit state with more than 10,000 cases with Mumbai alone, the financial capital of the country, hit with 6,000+ cases. As a result, 34% of student respondents were staying in buildings sealed by municipal corporations. Overall, 67% of the students were undergoing self-quarantine around the country. Under completely changed environmental living conditions, the survey resulted in an overwhelming 94% of the students choosing for no examination to be held during the pandemic. The survey observed the four major explanatory indicators that are possible learning outcome determinants influencing the choice for no examination during the pandemic. They are social sensitivity, infrastructure, psychological implications and future uncertainties.[13]

A careful study of the above mentioned clearly highlights that the students of the university are not in any frame of mind to write exams during the ongoing Covid – 19 crisis. The indefinite nature of the pandemic makes it clear that the UGC and the Union of India should not insist on examinations for the final semester students or for any other semester students and the assessment/promotion of the students should be simply done on the basis of their past performance as has been done by some of the premiere institutes of our country like the IITs and the NLUs.

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Infrastructure in India

- Electricity & Internet

The UGC has mandated that the universities conduct exams by way of online or offline (or a mix of both options) by September 2020. The important question which needs to be raised is that did UGC conduct a thorough empirical or theoretical analysis of the position of the electricity and internet related infrastructure across India. The UGC has assumed that the students of our country have access to high-quality computer hardware or fast, uninterrupted internet access. The basic premise on which the students of the university write their exams and compete with each other is that there would be a level playing field across the class or batch. Clearly, the UGC guidelines has failed to address this issue because the poor and marginalized students of our country can never even imagine of having the same electricity, computer and internet related resources as the students coming from the middle class and upper middle class sections of the society. The basic fundamental right of “Right to Equality” guaranteed by our Constitution to all university students stands breached and defeated owing to the guidelines issued by the UGC.

In a survey conducted with the students of the University of Maharashtra, it was concluded that that close to 12% of the university students’ parents were daily wage workers who have been severely affected due to the lockdown throughout the country. Similar number of students and their families were also beneficiaries of public distribution systems. The Survey also concluded that 36% of the students did not have a laptop at home. As per the Survey, this section of the sample fell in the lowest socio-economic levels and end up being most sensitive towards social consequences of the pandemic along with severe exposure to the disease.[1]

This survey also highlighted that 33% of students are out station students along with 21% of students living in a different state other than the educational institute. Even if a student lives in the same city as an educational institute, an overwhelming 95% of students do not feel safe to use public transport due to the risk of transmission of the virus. These constraints complicate the scope of offline examinations. While observing the possibility of the online learning and examination, it was observed in the survey that almost 45% of the students were with no Wifi connection. As per this survey lack of internet penetration in India poses a serious problem in implementing learning possibilities and examinations through online modes.[2]

According to another survey conducted by the Delhi University Teachers Association, over 85 percent students said that they are not in favor of the Online Open Book Examination (OBE). The survey found that around 34 %of the Delhi University students were not able to attend online classes though Google Meet, Zoom or any other application and around 38 percent students in DU have not been able to access reading material online, even if it been provided to them. The results of the survey[3]was:

- 6.7 percent have no internet connection
- 10.9 percent have only have 2G mobile internet
- 8.3 percent have no smartphone, laptop or tablet
- 74 percent have only smartphone
- Only 15.3 percent have laptops

[1] "Students Perception and Preference for Online Education in India during Covid - 19 Pandemic", Muthuprasad T, Aiswarya S, Aditya KS and Girish K Jha, 12 May 2020.

[2] Ibid

[3] "From DU to JNTU, Why Students All Over Are Opposing College Exams", The Quint, 25 July 2020

Infrastructure in India - Electricity & Internet

The “*QS I-GAUGE Further Academic Interest Report (FAIR) 2020*” survey has revealed some important data that can prove to be decisive in studying whether India is ready to embrace the concept of online learning in its entirety. Introducing some preliminary data from the survey, a total of 7,594 students from across the country except for the region of Andaman and Nicobar had responded to the survey. Among the respondents were, 62% male, 38% female and 0.02% transgender. The respondents were fairly heterogeneous in terms of their age group wherein 74% belonged to the age group of 18-22 years, 18% to 22-27 years, 5% to 16-18 years and 2% were above the age of 27 years. With respect to respondents who experienced scarce access to Internet connectivity and used no one particular source, 54% faced poor connectivity, and 47% faced signal issues. Amongst the ones who used WiFi dongle, 43% faced poor connectivity, 9% faced power issues and 48% faced signal issues. This data clearly shows that majority of the connectivity issues take place in the form of either poor connectivity or network issues.[4]

It would be safe to conclude that the infrastructure in terms of technology in India has not achieved a state of quality so as to ensure sound delivery of online classes to students across the country. It is seen that both the State and the private players have not yet managed to overcome technical challenges, for instance, in providing adequate power supply and ensuring effective connectivity as the data reveals. Although, due to the outbreak of COVID 19, the world had witnessed a massive shift from the traditional F2F to online platform as a mode of delivery of classes. Due to lack of proper infrastructure, a shift to a total reliance on the online platform for the delivery of lectures seems to be a distant dream.[5]

Lastly, amongst the respondents who used other service providers, 79% of the respondents faced power issues and 21% faced cable cuts. The trend again highlights poor connectivity and signal issues as the most prevailing problems concerning connectivity with another relatively growing factor which is that of power issues. Studies and reports regarding the consumption of power by the State authorities reveal that the States are not using power entirely due to COVID-19 situation thereby leaving a surplus supply for private entities and general public. Despite this, the data shows power issues to be a major cause of connectivity problems for as many as 93% of the respondents particularly who use connections like BBNL, Hathway and ACT. [6] Less than 40 percent of the Indian population (roughly 500 million people) are estimated to have smartphones. Even this estimate fails to provide a true picture of vast class and regional disparities. It is further estimated, as per the data from 2018, that only 31 percent of the population have a working 4G connection. And during March 2020, India ranked 71st for fixed broadband speed and 130th for mobile internet speed in the world (as per the Speedtest Global Index).[7]

There are some interesting case studies which have been published in the public domain from the lives of university students and how the proposed UGC guidelines have simply ignored the problem of connectivity and internet infrastructure. Case in point is Haseem who studies in a government school in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. He was promoted to class 11 in March, but isn't aware if he has been allotted the subjects of his choice. His school is taking online classes but he hasn't attended any so far. “We don't have a smartphone at home, so I do not know what's going on there. I study from a teacher in our vicinity.”[8]

[4] "Covid - 19, A wake up call for Indian Internet Service Providers", By QS I Gauge, 20 April 2020.

[5][6][7][8] Ibid

Infrastructure in India - Electricity & Internet

Walking or hitchhiking from home to the main road, taking a bus to Sonapat and then a passenger train to Azadpur, Delhi, then walking about a kilometer to board a Delhi Transport Corporation bus to Vishwavidyalaya, and then finally walking to his college. This is how the life of Brijesh Chowdhary, a student at the Delhi School of Journalism, looked like before the lockdown. He lives in Guhna village, Haryana. He belongs to a farmers' family. Reaching his college was already a Herculean task for him before the lockdown. He mentioned to Newslaundry that "This year our harvest was late so we couldn't earn much. Farmers do not have enough savings and we sometimes have to struggle to get food in our village. Internet connectivity is poor, so I have been unable to attend most classes. If they go ahead with online exams, I will have to drop a year." [9]

Another student of the Delhi School of Journalism, Ayantika Pal (who lives in Hooghly district, Bengal) stated that "In the last few weeks, pressure to submit assignments has grown. At first, I tried to attend the online classes, but the mobile internet speed is dropping by the day and there's no wi-fi at home. Also, we have got 10 new cases of coronavirus in my neighbourhood. That's aggravating our trauma and panic. Education is necessary, but so is the mental health of students. Lack of internet, traumatised surroundings, economic crisis...are we expected to act as robots?" [10]

After Kashmir was stripped of its autonomy, a partial lockdown has been in place there since August 2019. Schools and colleges were opened in March after months. However, the pandemic forced their re-closure. On the eve of the abrogation of Article 370, a communication blackout was imposed in the region. Over nine months later, phone and internet services are yet to be fully restored, restricting the valley's access to only slow-speed 2G mobile internet which is also frequently restricted due to one reason or the other. This abysmal state of affairs has made it really hard for teachers and students to capitalize on the online medium of classes. "We have been trying to talk to the department to put a halt to online classes, but to no avail," said Khan, a student of law at Kashmir University. "We have 130 students in our class but due to the connectivity issues, only 30-40 show up for online lectures." He added, "A lot of students don't have internet connections, and those who do can only access 2G, which doesn't allow for video lectures. We told the department that even if they wanted to take online classes, they should cover only 25 percent of the syllabus, so the students didn't miss out on a lot. But they didn't listen to us." [11]

Kasiar Malik, a master's student of literature at Kashmir University, expressed a similar concern. "Since the abrogation of Article 370, universities have been closed. I joined the university in October 2018 and since then I have only taken one semester's exams. When universities reopened this year, they tried teaching us the second semester through crash courses," he said. "Then, the university had to be closed again because of coronavirus. We had already suffered a loss that students from elsewhere cannot understand. Now, it's online courses. First of all, what can we do on the 2G network? Every five minutes, the meeting disconnects. The students are from various districts and, sooner or later, the internet is shut down somewhere." [12]

Infrastructure in India - Electricity & Internet

The public domain or a simple Google search is replete of case studies which clearly show the lack of access to quality internet connection with majority of the Indian university students across the country. The truth of the matter is that most of our country is still undergoing the information and technology revolution and we are at least 7 – 10 years away from achieving the required pan India internet infrastructure where we could even think on the lines of conducting remote online examinations. It is most surprising that the UGC has simply ignored the above-mentioned reports and data on the condition of the technology infrastructure in the country and has gone ahead to propose mandatory guidelines to conduct online/offline written examination for the university students.

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Teacher's Perspective to Online Exams

The interesting thing to note is that both the students and the professors/teachers are thinking alike on the idea of conducting online examinations during the current Covid 19 crisis. It will be interesting to note that various teacher / professor associations and leading professors (in their individual capacities) have come out in the open and supported the demands made by the university students to not conduct online examinations. The UGC seems to have taken such an inflexible position that the united voice of both the student community and the teacher/professor community is being ignored. The teachers/professors have on various occasions in the past few months advocated for the promotion and assessment of the university students on the basis of past performance and internal assessments.

In a survey conducted by some researchers with the teachers teaching at Maharashtra University, it was opined and recommended by the teachers that the promotion and assessment of university students should be done on the basis of the average of previous semester and ongoing semester internal examinations and class tests. Around 65% during the course of the survey expressed their clear intentions of not preferring an online mode of examination.[1] The DUTA has expressed its disappointment over the UGC guidelines on exams, saying that they show "complete disregard for students". A newspaper reports that DUTA, in a statement, said it "is appalled at the manner in which the government has cleared the way for forcing a sham of an exam on students". "An exam that has no sanctity and is discriminatory towards a large section of students is clearly being pushed with no other motive than to promote big business in the education," it said. The newspaper report further goes on to reproduce the statement of DUTA wherein DUTA mentions that "The UGC and HRD Ministry have shown a complete disregard for students with the revised guidelines," it added.[2] Another newspaper report has highlighted that the former UGC chairman Sukhdeo Thorat in a letter to the present incumbent, Dhirendra Pal Singh, stressed the demands by students across the country to scrap the final-year exams. Thorat stated: "The UGC's latest advisory on examinations is unfortunate because it takes us backwards rather than forward. It effectively extends the period for holding of exams (for final-year/semester cohorts) until September, the second such postponement. And it creates fresh uncertainty for states that had already decided to cancel exams." The newspaper report also highlights that Thorat suggested: "Using alternative methods of evaluation based on each student's own past performance (in exams conducted in normal times) offers a fair solution and brings closure, with the option of retaking the exam when normalcy is restored." This same newspaper report also highlighted that the Federation of Central Universities' Teachers' Associations also expressed displeasure at the UGC's decision to conduct final-year examinations, which as per the Federation defies "all logic, academic or otherwise". In a letter addressed to the UGC chairman on July 10, the Federation accused it of "coming under pressure from the government and from commercial interests which are hoping to make money from the online examination process by providing their 'services' for a fee." [3]

[1] "Education during pandemic: A study from a students' perspective in India", By Aditi Sawant, Adithya Balasubramanian and Badri G Narayanan, 27 May 2020.

[2] "UGC says has power to take action if states cancel university exams, do not follow its guidelines", India TV 12 July 2020.

[3] "Covid-19 & Education: Sternest Test", By Shaheen Parween, 18 July 2020.

Teacher's Perspective to Online Exams

Professor Faizan Mustafa, Vice Chancellor, NALSAR University of Law has taken a clear objection to the over regulation of the higher education in India. He has clearly stated that due to the entire confusion in policy on this issue by the UGC and the respective Governments, the students have ended up suffering as many Universities till date have not been able to finalize the end term examination system due to which the graduation and post graduation degrees of the students have been delayed. It will be appropriate to quote his view here as published in the Hindu:

"There is nothing like the UGC in the United States. The UGC was fundamentally meant to be the fund granting institution as is clear from its nomenclature. But the UGC Act 1956 does confer on it the power of 'coordination and determination of standards' in universities as well and, therefore, it has become the regulator of higher education..... While the guidelines state that the decision has been taken keeping in view the future of the students — jobs and higher education — these prospects are, in fact, harmed by this decision. In normal circumstances, examinations would have been conducted and either results announced or provisional certificates given by this time. These help students who are graduating confirm their admissions in institutes of higher education or report at their places of employment by furnishing proof of them having completed the course. The current system does not provide for any such possibility."[4]

Many teacher bodies have also voiced an objection towards the entire concept of treating university examinations as the only way of assessment and evaluation of the capabilities and hard work of the students. An interesting article written by Mr. Manish Sisodia in the Indian Express provides some interesting thoughts. This article highlights that the UGC's decision to enforce exams for final-year students, while cancelling other semester exams, betrays its poor understanding of the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) adopted by India's universities. The article further goes on to state that under the CBCS, the academic years are split into semesters that carry more or less equal weightage towards awarding degrees to graduates. Every semester is equal and independent of other semesters. This article states that the UGC's guidelines reveal that it does not understand this simple truth. The article decries the notion where the Centre believes that final semester exams are "exit" exams and, therefore, more important. The article confirms that nothing could be further from the truth. The article finally affirms that the basis for cancelling intermediate semester exams applies just as much to final semester exams.[5]

The author of the article also advances the entire argument about the lack of access to online classes for a vast majority of university students. The article states that universities provide education to students, and based on this education, students are assessed through exams. When the coronavirus disrupted the teaching-learning process, it negated the very basis of exams. What will we test our students on? Do we expect them to have deep insights into their final-semester syllabus by birth? The coronavirus pandemic is a once-in-a-century event and if we do not rise to the occasion and respond to it appropriately, we will be failing our citizens. Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures.

[4] "University examination guidelines that score low", The Hindu, By Professor Faizan Mustafa & Sugghosh Joshi, 19 July 2020.

[5] "UGC needs to revisit its guidelines on final - year examinations immediately", Indian Express, 16 July 2020.

Teacher's Perspective to Online Exams

The article then goes on to propose that examinations are not the only way to assess students. It has been advocated in the article that the reliance on written, subjective-type exams has already stagnated our university courses and the way they are taught at colleges. It is in fact true that the world's finest educational institutions have cancelled exams during the pandemic and chosen to conduct internal assessments. The IITs and the NLUs are India's premier centres of education. They have all completed their evaluation of final-year students through internal assessments and granted them degrees. As per the above mentioned Indian Express article, a relevant case in point is the Delhi government's Ambedkar University which has always followed a system of continuous evaluation, which does not place an undue premium on end-semester examinations.[6]

Therefore, it is clear that both the students and the teachers/professors are not convinced by the stand taken by the UGC and the Union of India. It is rather strange that after getting a consistent and unanimous feedback from almost all stakeholders, the UGC has decided to stick to its original stand and is proposing mandatory written examinations for the students of the final year. This White Paper is an effort to bring together all the existing research, opinions and data on this subject so that possibly, the UGC may re consider the representations and finally decide on promoting the students of the university on the basis of past assessment results and other internal evaluations.

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This White Paper will remain lopsided if it does not discuss some of the points which have been raised by the UGC and the Union of India in support of its stand for conducting mandatory online/offline examinations for final year students notwithstanding the Covid – 19 crisis. The UGC and the Union of India vide its notifications and press releases have argued that university degrees hold a great amount of value and legitimacy in the context of the career of a candidate. The UGC is also of the view that a degree which has been issued without written examinations would lack the appropriate credence and weight in the employment markets. The UGC has specifically mentioned that scrapping of written examinations would mean that those students who wanted to improve their marks/performance in the final semester would now not get the opportunity to do so.

To quote specifically from the UGC press release dated 6 July 2020, the UGC is of the opinion that:

“In view of the emerging situation related to COVID-19 pandemic in India, it is important to safeguard the principles of health, safety, fair and equal opportunity for students. At the same time, it is very crucial to ensure academic credibility, career opportunities and future progress of students globally. Academic evaluation of students is very important milestone in any education system. The performance in examinations gives confidence and satisfaction to the students and is a reflection of competence, performance and credibility that is necessary for global acceptability. UGC is constantly making efforts to address various issues related to teaching, learning, examinations, academic calendar etc. in the difficult times of COVID-19 pandemic.”[1]

Fundamentally, the above-mentioned view of the UGC is problematic on two premises. First, it is settled position now that there are numerous ways of academic assessment and evaluation, written examinations being only one of them. Secondly, confidence and satisfaction of the students within the students can be derived from various ways and modes, written examinations being only one of them. The UGC seems to have taken a myopic view of the way and manner in which assessment/evaluation can be conducted for the university students. This White Paper shall discuss at length some of the alternative methodologies by way of which the students can be assessed and evaluated in the next chapter.

[1] UGC Press Release dated 6 July 2020.

Apathy towards critical and analytical intellectual development has hamstrung the ability of Indian student to compete with their foreign counterparts for leading internships, placements and fellowship programs in other countries. The examination score bandwagon has only enabled students to treat their course material as a tool to fetch numerically determined academic success. This attitude stultifies the real intellectual development of students.[2] Students are made to internalize this attitude from the very primary level of our education system. While board examination scores are put on a pedestal, critical and analytical mental skills of students are perpetually back-burnered. When the very foundations of our educational system are built on wrong values, the improvement of the quality of Indian workforce remains a chimera.

There are numerous studies and research which conclude the pros and cons of using written examinations as the sole method for assessing and evaluating university students. These studies and research advocate various other ways and modes by which assessment and evaluation of university students can be done. Some of these alternative ways have been discussed in the next chapter of this White Paper. It is strongly advised that the UGC instead of remaining stuck only at written examinations as the mode of assessment should also consider other means to complete the assessments and evaluation of the university students.

Unprecedented times call for unprecedented solutions. This White Paper strongly advocate that the UGC and the Union of India should not rely so heavily on written examinations (online or offline) as the only way of assessing the university students. An application of the laid down guidelines during the present covid crisis would be unfair and arbitrary towards the important lives and careers of the university students. There are several ways of adjudicating merit in a given set of university students. These ways may not be as objective and as sharp as the written examinations, nonetheless, they come with their own set of advantages which written examinations do not provide. Hence, in light of the special circumstances, the UGC and the Union of India should definitely re-consider the stand which they have taken.

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[2] "Mandating final-year university exams is reflective of the shortcomings of India's higher education system", By Noumaan Anwer, 1 July 2020.

Recommendations

As has been argued consistently throughout the course of this paper, it is once again reiterated that the UGC and the Union of India should immediately withdraw the notifications and the guidelines which they have issued in relation to the university examinations for the students of the final semester.

It will be unfair and unreasonable, to say the least, if the UGC and the Union of India go on to mandate the universities to hold the written examinations notwithstanding the peculiar situation which has been thrown up by the Covid – 19 crisis on the students of the poor and marginalized sections of our society. At the cost of repetition, it is stated once again that if the online university examinations are conducted by the universities then it will directly impinge on the fundamental “Right to Equality” of the university students from the poor and marginalized sections of our society who have little or no access to computer / internet infrastructure vis a vis the middle class and upper middle class students who have resources of high quality.

Holding offline / physical exams is also not a feasible alternative in the present day scenario simply because of the rising numbers of Covid – 19 cases in India. The option of conducting written examinations in the middle of this pandemic is simply not worth risking the lives of students and their families. One of the ways in which assessment / evaluation maybe conducted is that the results for this semester or academic year can be based on average of the internal exams of the current semester and previous semester. Another possible alternative is that final-year students could be given a provisional degree based on their past performance and they can sit for exams as and when they have the materials and the tenure of the teaching class has been completed as would have happened in a regular year. This provisional degree can highlight the past grades/marks of the concerned student which he or she has secured in the run-up years before the final year or the final semester.[1]

Professor Faizan Mustafa also agrees that the higher education system should not take a myopic view favoring only written examinations as the method of assessment of the capabilities of the students. It would be apt to quote from his article published in the Hindu on 19th July 2020:

“It is a matter of concern that our education system continues to be examination-centric and these guidelines fail to take into account the fact that the validity of examinations fundamentally depends on their reliability. Most examinations in India merely test an ability to recall facts or information rather than an understanding of those facts or an ability to use them in practical situations. Most teachers too are not trained in setting good papers particularly for online open-book examinations. Certification through examination is important but cannot and should not be the sole goal of education. Hundreds of our students every year take unfortunate steps because of examination stress. A one size fits all cannot apply to our universities as we have all kinds of universities, i.e. unitary, affiliating, private and subject specific.”[2]

[1]"Universities should not conduct exams amid pandemic, online tests 'discriminatory', says Kapil Sibal", The Hindu.

[2] "University examination guidelines that score low", The Hindu, By Professor Faizan Mustafa & Sughosh Joshi, 19 July 2020,

Recommendations

There is no foolproof way out of this problem. The above mentioned recommendation does have its own set of problems like undermining the objective criteria by which students of the June 2020 batch would be considered and rated vis a vis the students of batches of 2019 or 2021 for that matter. However, the above mentioned is the “best bad solution” we have. It is certainly better than risking the lives of our university students and their family members or holding online exams in which the students having better computer and internet infrastructure will excel thereby impinging on the “Right to Equality” of the lesser privileged students.

These are strange and unprecedented times and such times require decision making backed by strong conviction and exceptional courage. The team here at AIPC only hopes and wishes that the concerned office bearers of the UGC and the Hon`ble office bearers of the Union of India exhibit wisdom and courage in their decision making and take a decision keeping in the mind the “best interests” of the university students.

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About AIPC

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