

Rethink competitive exams: Evaluate a broader set of student capabilities

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Summary

- India would do better by using proper selection methods over stressful tests for admission to top colleges, especially IITs. The false notion of 'merit' needs to be rethought and top-quality institutions should devise new ways to fill their seats.

The central conceit of colleges such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) is that they are the best. The oxygen that gives life to this conceit is that they get the 'best' students. 'Best' here has a specific meaning, referring to students who are hard-working and focused, and who adapt well to certain kinds of testing. These three capacities stand them in good stead even after they graduate. However, these are a small subset of the capacities that are desirable and necessary in life.

Admission to these colleges is through a competitive exam where students are rank ordered; a few thousand get in and millions get 'rejected.' But this doesn't mean that those who did not

get admission were not worthy of such education. It is just that these colleges did not have enough seats.

If there were enough seats, it is likely a very large number of the students would get in, because then admission would be based on an assessment of whether a given student has the requisite capacities to participate in, and benefit from, the educational programme. This would be determined by a set of qualifying criteria assessed by the examination.

Currently, these so-called competitive entrance examinations are really an elimination exercise and not a selection. The latter would admit all those who qualify based on the set of criteria. Let's now consider three other related issues.

First, the sort of testing these exams do cannot assess other important life capacities such as creativity, deep conceptual understanding and the application of it, not to mention social capacities and genuine interests. The societal value of these other capacities gets undermined by the testing system, since 'cracking' these tests matter hugely to too many, driving mass aspirations.

Second, such super high-stakes exams are one of the primary causes of social, mental and economic problems among aspiring students and their families, and for many more who can't even participate in this race. This national malaise is well known.

Third, let's get rid of the false idea of 'merit.' Such tests are blunt instruments without the precision that can guarantee consistent differentiation between two or more students. Test repetition could raise a student's rank. In any case, it assesses a narrow set of capacities from a much wider set that should determine 'merit,' even if we partially accept the dodgy idea that there is something called 'merit' intrinsic to people. So, rank ordering by such an entrance test is not a reflection of merit.

Given all those problems, can we think of a better way of selection? Let us consider one such method, credit for the core idea of which must go to my colleague, Ramchandar. It would be much better to use assessment methods that can assess many more capacities and in greater depth; some of our board examinations are being improved to become more like this.

A basic set of qualifying criteria can be determined for any of these examinations. These criteria would tell us that the student has adequate capacity to participate and learn from the higher education programme that she is seeking admission to. All the students who pass exams with these qualifying criteria would be eligible for admission to these institutions.

As an example, let's assume that these criteria are marked by the achievement of 70% in each of four subjects. If 10,000 students have this qualification and only 2,000 seats are available, then a randomized selection is made. So, once a student has demonstrated the relevant qualifying capacities, then it is a matter of chance whether the person makes it to a certain college or not. What would this method achieve?

First, it will dramatically reduce the pressure on students and their families. They only need to make sure that they achieve the examination's qualifying numbers, and beyond that they know it's a matter of chance; this way, there is no competitive pressure of elimination. This will significantly relieve the mental, social and economic stress that families suffer.

Second, since these examinations will assess a much broader set of capacities versus the narrow ones being tested today, this change will help improve our education. In fact, this narrowing of educational aims, driven by the narrow focus of current competitive entrance examinations, is also contributing in some sense to the narrowing of our society and collective competence.

Third, now our so-called best colleges will be tested on how good their education really is. This is because incoming students will have broad capacities, rather than being chosen on narrow ones concentrated on doing well in standard-format exams.

What about those students who are not given admission despite demonstrating the qualifying skills because of inadequate seats in these colleges? From a numbers perspective, the situation will be no different from today. Yet, it will be much better for all those who do not get admission because they would know they missed out by chance, versus the situation today, where the message is that they are unworthy of seats.

The real solution for our country is to build adequate capacity in high-quality higher education institutions, so that all those who aspire for such education can be accommodated. But that may take a long time to become a reality. Till then, we must address this national malaise afflicting our young and the insidious role of the current system in narrowing the collective capacity of our society.