

Evaluating Student Perceptions and Awareness of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) in India

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Abstract: *This study investigates the awareness and perspectives of students regarding the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) in India. It analyzes the psychological and financial implications of this shift from merit-based to examination-based admission in central universities. The results obtained from questionnaire responses (n=2142) showed that 36.1% of students were in favor of CUET, and 45.5% had enrolled in a coaching program for its preparation. Only 33.8% were fully aware of the examination modalities. 36.2%, and 39.2% of students agreed that CUET was better than the merit-based system and will create equal opportunity respectively. However, 43.4% stated that CUET will create mental stress/anxiety among aspiring students. Thus, the findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators in implementing educational reforms.*

Keywords: Common University Entrance Test (CUET), merit-based system, stress, anxiety

1. Introduction

Reforms in the education system are inevitable and must be inclusive ensuring that all aspiring students are provided with equal opportunities for learning. In other words, the learners should not be excluded due to financial, economic, gender, and digital disparities. As part of the reforms in the Indian Education system, the implementation of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) from the current academic year (2022) is being perceived as a great turning point in higher education by academicians and policymakers. Although, examinations are an integral part of any education system and provide a valuable basis for the assessment of students' learning. But examinations also affect psychological aspects including stress and anxiety among students [1] [2]. These aspects were further aggravated due to pandemic times when the entire world was crippled by Covid-19 disease [3]. Though the efforts continued toward the improvement of students' learning through online teaching, the gaps in learning cannot be denied. While students were struggling to combat the after-effects of online education, the National Testing Agency (NTA), established under the Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of India, was assigned the responsibility of conducting the entrance tests for all the Central Universities access India [4]. The aim of CUET was to bridge the gap and provide equal opportunities to students from all walks of life irrespective of education board, merit, area, financial background, etc., and to establish a connection between universities [5].

Earlier many of the central universities were seeking merit-based admission to undergraduate (UG) courses and the biggest shortcoming of the system was that it created peer pressure among students to secure a seat in their dream college which often lead to stress and rote learning among

them [6]. Also, the inconsistency in evaluation patterns across different education boards (like Central Board of Secondary Education CBSE, Indian Certificate of Secondary Education ICSE, Uttar Pradesh or UP board, Haryana board, Rajasthan board etc.) limits the option for students to apply in the universities of their choice in accordance with the merit-based admission process. Thus, entrance examinations like CUET have been perceived as a gateway for 'fair' admissions wherein, students are evaluated on the basis of their conceptual understanding only [7]. However, the competitive pressure and stress of clearing out CUET have led to mushrooming of coaching centres which may lead to an extra financial burden on parents. Students from rural, and remote areas might be frightened due to economic and digital limitations [8]. Thus, besides having many positive aspects with respect to creating equal opportunities, CUET has created stress and anxiety among students, teachers and parents. The uncertainty and lack of awareness may lead to high enrollment in coaching centres with the added financial burden. Therefore, it becomes indispensable to check the awareness of CUET among students and to analyze the perception of the merit-based system vs. entrance exams for admission in central universities. Thus, the first survey-based study was conducted to collect the opinion of students about various aspects related to CUET.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample size & data collection

An online survey was conducted from June 2022 to July 2022 for the duration of two months. The Google form was circulated among school students studying in X, XI, and XII standards, residing all over India. A total of 2142 responses were collected. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their consent was taken.

2.2 Survey questionnaire

A uniform bilingual (English and Hindi) Google form questionnaire, consisting of 29 close-ended questions, was prepared and shared online via different platforms like Gmail, WhatsApp, Instagram and other social media handles. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about the basic sociodemographic details of participants, general awareness about CUET, and understand the anxiety and stress levels associated with CUET. The questions were also asked to analyze the perception of the merit-based system vs. entrance exams for admission in central universities and any underlying financial aspects related to CUET.

2.3 Data analysis

Data collected was compiled and analyzed using percentage statistics.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Socio-demographics & Educational background

A total of 2142 responses were received from students residing all over India. The average age of respondents was 18 years and the majority of respondents (55.6%, n=1192) belonged to the union territory of Delhi (Figure 1, Table 1). Among the participants, 38.5% were female, 32.8% were male, and 28.5% chose not to disclose their gender. With respect to grade of study, 40.9% were in class XII, followed by 30.5% in XI and 28.5% in grade X. The survey was a uniform representation of students belonging to different subjects/educational streams (37.7% - Science; 31% - humanities; 31.3% - commerce). 27.1% students of in the present survey were enrolled in CBSE, followed by 14.8% from the Board of Secondary Education- Rajasthan, 14.7% from Uttar Pradesh Board of High School and Intermediate Education (UPMSP), 14.5% from the Board of School Education, Haryana, 14.4% from ICSE, and 14.6% from other education boards (Table 1).

Table 1: Sociodemographic Details of Students

Question	Parameter	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
State	Delhi	1192	55.6
	Other States/ Union Territories	950	44.4
	Total	2142	
Gender	Female	825	38.5
	Male	702	32.8
	Prefer not to say	615	28.7
	Total	2142	
In which standard do you study?	Grade X	613	28.6
	Grade XI	653	30.5
	Grade XII	876	40.9
	Total	2142	
What is your current educational background?	Science	808	37.7
	Commerce	670	31.3
	Humanities	664	31
	Total	2142	
Board of study	CBSE	581	27.1
	ICSE	308	14.4
	Board of School Education,	310	14.5

Haryana		
Board of Secondary Education, Rajasthan	317	14.8
UP Board of High School and Intermediate Education	314	14.7
Any Other	312	14.6
Total	2142	

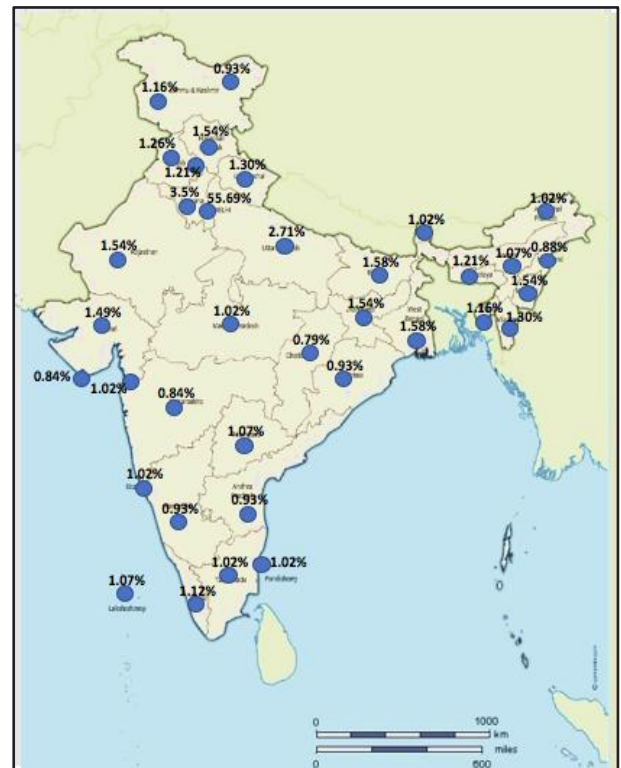


Figure 1: Survey data collected across different regions of India (marked as blue circles with percentage of responses received). Map credits-<https://map.comersis.com/India-maps-IN.html>

3.2 Awareness of CUET

Only 23.8% of the students from the present study felt that public opinion was taken before CUET implementation and only 32.4% of respondents were affirmative that enough time was given to prepare for the CUET examination for the current academic year. Regarding the mode of CUET, only 33.8% of students choose the correct option that it will be conducted in online mode. Only 32.3% of the respondents were aware of the MCQ type pattern of exams, while 20.5% were expecting it to be a subjective type and 23.2% of respondents had a hybrid notion in mind. Only, 38.9% of respondents were aware of the three sections in the CUET. Similarly, students were not sure about the duration of the examination and only 36.2% were sure that language skills would also be assessed in the examination (Table 2). Interestingly, we also found that 39.9% and 31% of respondents searched for all or some of the answers to the questionnaire respectively, suggesting a lack of complete awareness about the examination modalities of CUET. So, we found that majority of students were not aware of the mode, pattern, sections, duration, sections, and format of the examination.

Table 2: Awareness for CUET among the Students

Question	Parameter	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Do you think a public opinion was taken before implementing CUET?	Yes	510	23.8
	No	563	26.3
	Maybe	464	21.7
	Not aware	605	28.2
Total		2142	
Do you think students are given enough time to prepare for CUET for the current academic year?	Yes	695	32.4
	No	767	35.8
	Maybe	680	31.8
	Total	2142	
Are you aware about the mode of CUET?	Online	724	33.8
	Offline	764	35.7
	Hybrid	654	30.5
	Total	2142	
What will be the exam pattern of CUET?	MCQ type	691	32.3
	Subjective type	439	20.5
	Both	497	23.2
	Do not know	515	24
Total		2142	
Do you know how many sections will be there in CUET?	One	615	28.7
	Two	693	32.4
	Three	834	38.9
	Total	2142	
What is the duration of CUET?	1 hour	504	23.5
	2 hours	525	24.5
	3 hours	651	30.4
	4 hours	462	21.6
Total		2142	
Do you think assessment of language skills will also be done in CUET?	Yes	775	36.2
	No	676	31.6
	Maybe	691	32.2
	Total	2142	

3.3 Students' perception of CUET

The present study found that 51% (n=1092) of students had never appeared for any entrance examination and thus, CUET will be one of their first entrance tests. Regarding willingness to appear for CUET, 69% were positive as they might want to secure a seat for higher studies. Only 31% were sure that they were not aspiring for the exam. Among 32.7% of the students who were not in the favor of the implementation of CUET for admission to higher education, 31.3%, 31.3% and 37.4% were from commerce, humanities and sciences background respectively (Figure 2). The rest (67.3%, n=1441) were either positive or neutral in their views. 45.5% (n=974) of the students had enrolled themselves on some training program for CUET preparation. 34.6% and 34.9% of students were completely or partially confident that they can qualify for CUET without any help/assistance from coaching centres respectively (Table 3).

Table 3: Perception of Students about CUET

Question	Parameter	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Have you ever appeared for any entrance exam?	Yes	1050	49
	No	1092	51
	Total	2142	
Are you aspiring for CUET?	Yes	794	37.1
	No	664	31
	Maybe	684	31.9
	Total	2142	

Are you in favour of CUET?	Yes	773	36.1
	No	701	32.7
	Maybe	668	31.2
	Total	2142	
Did you enroll yourself in some specific training program/course/coaching with respect to CUET preparation?	Yes	974	45.5
	No	1168	54.5
	Total	2142	
If you have not enrolled for any training/course/coaching, then are you confident that you will be able to clear CUET?	Yes	740	34.6
	No	654	30.5
	Maybe	748	34.9
	Total	2142	

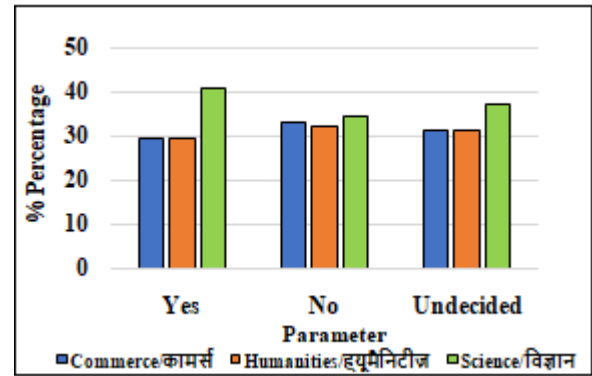


Figure 2: Stream-wise Segregation of Students in the Favor of CUET

We did not find any significant difference in the enrollment for the CUET coaching across students of different educational backgrounds or streams. Among 45.5% of the total enrolled students for the CUET coaching, 32.07%, 32.99% and 34.94% students were from commerce, humanities and science streams respectively (Figure 3).

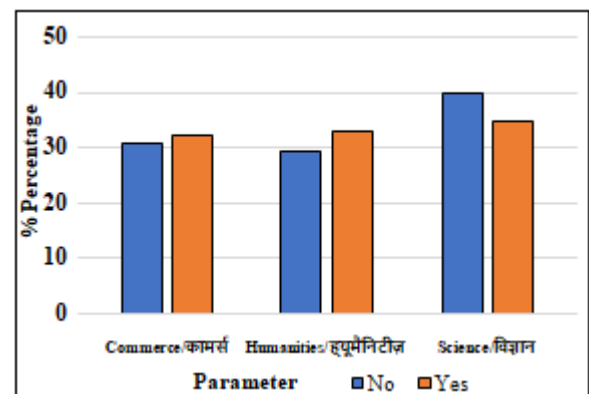


Figure 3: Stream-wise Enrollment of Aspiring Students for the CUET Coaching

3.4 Psychological Impact on Students

Data analysis revealed that 43.4% and 44.9% of the students accepted that CUET would lead to mental stress or anxiety and a higher level of competitive pressure among aspiring candidates respectively (Table 4). 44.9% of respondents stated that CUET will create competitive pressure among students. Thus, increased competition will lead to further stress or anxiety among students[2] [9]. Also, no significant difference was observed between the perceived examination stress/anxiety and the educational background of a student. This suggests that students from either educational

background are highly prevalent to mental stress or anxiety (Figure 4).

Table 4: Study of Psychological Impact on Students

Question	Parameter	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
CUET will create mental stress/ anxiety among the aspiring students.	Strongly agree	448	20.9
	Agree	482	22.5
	Undecided/ Neutral	464	21.7
	Disagree	386	18
	Strongly disagree	362	16.9
	Total	2142	
CUET test will create a competition pressure among students?	Strongly agree	501	23.4
	Agree	460	21.5
	Undecided/ Neutral	404	18.9
	Disagree	393	18.3
	Strongly disagree	384	17.9
	Total	2142	

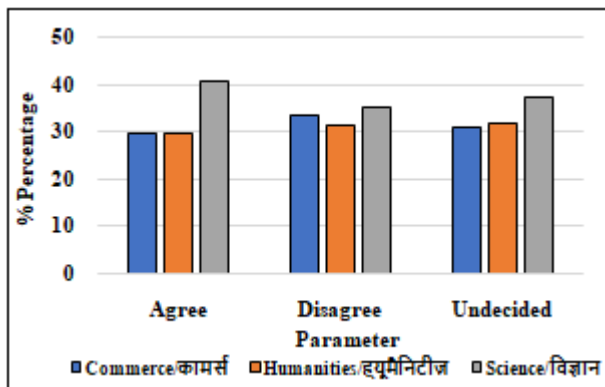


Figure 4: Stream-wise Analysis of Mental Stress/anxiety Level

The print and social media are representing CUET as the most aspiring examination in India after NEET [10]. The level of competition among students is increasing every year to secure a seat in the desired university for their preferred course. This could increase the stress or anxiety among students which is reflected in our data as well wherein 27.31%, 30% and 42.68% of students of grades X, XI and XII respectively were in the agreement on the psychological impact even in the first edition of CUET (Figure 5).

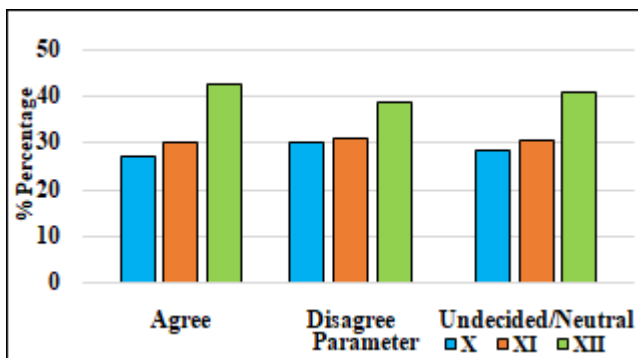


Figure 5: Psychological Impact of CUET on Students of Different Grades

3.5 Financial Aspects related to CUET

In the current survey, general data was also collected with respect to the number of siblings, profession and income of parents. The study found that 36.9% of the students came from families with a monthly income of less than five lakhs.

39.1% of students stated that CUET will boost private coaching institutes and the remaining were either negative (29.8%) or not completely sure (31.1%). Thus, CUET will play a pivotal role in uplifting an already flourishing ‘coaching culture’ in India[11] [12]. Also, 45.2% were affirmative that preparing for CUET will pose an extra financial burden on their parents (Table 5). Earlier, the majority of parents were shelling out money only for the coaching and preparation of exams like the National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET) for medical, Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for engineering, Common Law Admission Test (CLAT) for law, Common Admission Test (CAT) for management programs, and other professional course entrance exams, however, now even for getting admission to a UG course, the students will have to achieve top ranks in CUET. The pan-India acceptance of CUET for higher education has provided a business ecosystem for the already saturated coaching market in India[13]. As reported, there is a higher fee for filling up the CUET form as compared to the merit-based form for various categories[5] [14]. So, the rat race to clear the entrance and thus assistance of coaching institutes will add a level of exclusion criterion for the low-income class in India where economic disparity is already at a higher level [15].

Table 5: Analysis of the Financial Aspect Associated with CUET Preparation

Question	Parameter	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
How many siblings do you have?	None	395	18.4
	One	520	24.3
	Two	433	20.2
	Three	396	18.5
	More than three	398	18.6
	Total	2142	
What is the profession of your parents? (select all that apply)	Teacher	416	19.4
	Corporate	412	19.2
	Homemaker	390	18.2
	Business	469	21.9
	Other	514	24
In which of the following sectors does one or both of your parents work? (select all that apply)	Education	278	13
	Public	323	15.1
	Private	384	17.9
	Semi Private	259	12.1
	NGO	277	12.9
	Freelance	292	13.6
	Others	368	17.2
What is your monthly family income?	Less than five lakh per annum	790	36.9
	Between five to ten lakh per annum	651	30.4
	More than ten lakh per annum	701	32.7
	Total	2142	
What is your monthly family expenditure?	Less than five lakh per annum	817	38.1
	Between five to ten lakh per annum	656	30.6
	More than ten lakh per annum	669	31.2
	Total	2142	
Do you think CUET will boost private coaching institutes meant for	Yes	837	39.1
	No	638	29.8
	Maybe	667	31.1

preparing students for this exam?	Total	2142	
Preparing for CUET from private coaching institutes will pose an extra financial burden on students/parents?	Strongly agree	540	25.2
	Agree	428	20
	Undecided/Neutral	410	19.1
	Disagree	390	18.2
	Strongly disagree	374	17.5
	Total	2142	

3.6 Merit-based System Vs CUET

The implementation of CUET has been perceived as a major educational reform in the Indian education system, which will help to create equal opportunity for all students for higher education in contrast to the merit-based system. It was observed that 39.2% of respondents gave positive affirmation about this assertion while 31.5% of respondents were still not sure. This suggests that students perceive this reform as a positive change. This may be due to the fact that all the education boards across India do not follow a uniform evaluation pattern, which leads to disparity in the marks scored by students. Thus, many deserving students are denied admissions purely on the basis of a cut-off or merit-based system. Similarly, 70.7% (n= 1514) responded that CUET will create equal opportunity for all the students for higher education in contrast to the merit-based system (Table 6).

Table 6: Comparison Between Merit-based System and CUET for Undergraduate Admission

Question	Parameter	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Do you think CUET is better than MERIT based system for undergraduate admission?	Yes	776	36.2
	No	661	30.9
	Maybe	705	32.9
	Total	2142	
Do you think CUET will create equal opportunity for all the students for higher education in contrast to MERIT BASED system?	Yes	839	39.2
	No	628	29.3
	Maybe	675	31.5
	Total	2142	
Did this questionnaire motivate you to search for the responses of specific questions about CUET?	Yes	854	39.9
	No	624	29.1
	Maybe	664	31
	Total	2142	

4. Conclusions

India is a large and diverse country not only with respect to culture, and language but also in terms of education. There are various education boards, hundreds of universities, and thousands of colleges. Higher education is a turning point for many students and creates opportunities for their career growth and development. Thus, it is important that a student gets an equal chance to get admission in the course, or college of their choice and should not be decided by merit because, in India, a uniform evaluation pattern is not followed across various education boards. CUET offers that opportunity to all aspiring students where they can appear for an entrance examination and will be evaluated on the basis of their subject knowledge. As reiterated by policymakers, the syllabus for CUET will be based on their existing knowledge, and National Council of Educational

Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks and students need not depend on coaching institutes for the preparation. However, there is a significant difference in the syllabus of NCERT and state board books, thus students from such education boards might face difficulties. It has been observed from the current survey that students are not apprehensive about CUET and the general perception is positive but there is a lack of awareness about its conduct and pattern which will definitely create a negative impact on their preparation and performance in exams. Also, the mental pressure of clearing the entrance examination may also lead to anxiety and stress among students and parents as well. The assistance of coaching institutes and associated financial burden cannot be neglected where parents have to support the education of more than one child.

Thus, the study concludes that while the CUET offers equal educational opportunities, it also brings challenges like increased stress and financial burdens. It underscores the need for better awareness and preparation among stakeholders, which could alleviate anxiety and ensure a more equitable education system.

5. Future Outcomes

The implementation of CUET would disregard how well students score in their education board exams because admittance to UG courses will only be based on their CUET scores. The majority of CBSE students might be at advantage as compared to state board students given that CUET will be based on NCERT textbooks because not all other education boards follow such textbooks. Further, the availability of yearly question banks may further increase the acquaintance with modalities of CUET and may also help in subsiding fear among aspiring students. Also, CUET is a gateway for UG admission for a large number of students (~10-12 lakhs) across India, thus there is a need for upliftment of infrastructural requirements including the addition of more examination centres with good internet connectivity for its smooth conduction at such a large scale.

6. Significance of the Study

This article's significance lies in its exploration of the CUETs impact on students, an essential factor in understanding and navigating Indians evolving educational landscape. It provides a foundational study for future educational policy decisions.

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