

Trendspotting: Why Things Matter

June 2024

Trendspotting: Why Things Matter is a collaboration between The Hearth Advisors Group and India Habitat Centre, New Delhi where we present discussions about an evolving future. The monthly series connects the frontiers of academia, research, societal concerns, technology and evolving thought with issues that matter to people's lives. We intend that our audience discovers insights and predictions to be prepared for a thriving tomorrow by breaking down silos between education, employability, research, technology, and sustainability. The monthly Trendspotting discussions at the Habitat Centre in New Delhi invite exciting Indian and international panellists, business leaders, academics, policymakers, practitioners and civil society, fostering an environment where ideas flourish.

The upcoming session is on **21 June 2024 at 7 PM**, Gulmohar Hall, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi.

Session 7

Shifting Goalposts: The Ephemeral Criteria for College Admissions

The school-leaving board examinations in India have been the goal of academic pursuits for 14 years of education of an individual. These examinations have reigned supreme, casting their shadow of all-pervasiveness over countless students. The board examination has been a gateway to colleges, impacting the course of an individual's career by determining the form and quality of higher education. Recently, the landscape of college admissions in India has undergone significant changes. The emphasis has moved from a summative board examination to standardised college entrance tests. While college entrance tests for professional higher education (such as JEE, NEET, CLAT) have existed for over a decade, the introduction of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) introduces standardised entrance across various central universities and other participating institutions in India for undergraduate admissions. Broadly, the benefits of CUET include levelling the playing field for university entrance in the face of potential biases due to numerous examination boards, focus on subject proficiency and potential stress mitigation for students. However, like any major change to a longstanding mechanism, this, too, has ignited debate. Do standardised entrance exams for undergraduate studies truly bridge the gap between different examination boards, or do they inadvertently reinforce existing disparities, exacerbating the divide between the privileged and the disadvantaged? Will a common entrance examination alleviate the pressure on high school students, or does this leave them in conflict between performance in board examinations and college admissions without precedence in aid? Will these changes reinforce the culture of rote learning and standardised competition, or will it finally grant the freedom in school education which has been the educators' quest for quite some time? With these changes in undergraduate admissions criteria, why should students

work hard for their board examinations? Does the school-leaving performance matter anymore? If not, should there be changes in the school schedule, curriculum, and form for senior classes?

These questions are of immediate importance to students, schools, and parents. They are also of significance for the national education policy and industry. Join us for our June session of Trendspotting where, as always, we attempt to unpack these queries to gain insight into the differing perspectives and shed some light on the way ahead. We delve into the nuances of these changes impacting school and undergraduate education in the country with a panel of educators, administrators, policymakers, and industry experts. The panellists will explore the impact of the decreasing relevance of school-leaving examinations as an entrance criterion and the greater role of specialised admissions tests. We will focus on how this will affect student learning paradigms. How can the current system, with its myriad testing requirements, cultivate holistic learning and enable students to flourish in their pursuit of knowledge?

Suggested Readings

The controversy around NEET UG 2024, The Economic Times (2024). Accessible [here](#).

The NEET UG 2024 results have sparked significant controversy due to allegations of irregularities, including paper leaks and inflated scores. The National Testing Agency (NTA) announced the results on June 4, 2024, for an exam taken by over 24 lakh candidates on May 5, 2024. Several concerns were raised, such as an unusually high number of candidates scoring perfect marks (67 students), and reports of multiple top scorers emerging from the same examination centres. These irregularities have led to scrutiny and demands for investigations. The NTA responded by forming a Grievance Redressal Committee to address issues such as loss of exam time at certain centres and discrepancies in the answer key due to textbook variations. The agency also provided compensatory marks to 1,563 candidates affected by exam disruptions. Despite the NTA's explanations and measures, affected students and political leaders continue to demand a thorough investigation to restore confidence in the examination process.

Shilpi Banerjee, How to make CUET a success, The Indian Express (2024). Accessible [here](#).

The article discusses the introduction of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) in India, which aims to replace multiple entrance exams for university admissions with a single test. This change is intended to reduce stress for students and provide equal opportunities for those from diverse backgrounds. However, the article highlights potential drawbacks, such as the reinforcement of coaching class culture, disadvantages for students from marginalised backgrounds, and a focus on rote learning over holistic education. The CUET could also undermine the autonomy of state universities in designing their admissions processes. To ensure CUET's success, the article suggests involving key stakeholders in its design and

review, aligning assessments with subject-specific competencies, and accommodating the diversity of state board curricula.

Farida Abdulla Khan, Will a Common Undergrad Entrance Test Fix the Problems of India's Education System? The Wire (2022). Accessible [here](#).

The article discusses the introduction of the Common Undergraduate Entrance Test (CUET) in India, intended to streamline college admissions. However, it argues that CUET may not solve deeper issues of access, equity, and social justice in education. High-stakes testing could disadvantage students from marginalised backgrounds, reinforcing existing inequalities. Instead of addressing the diverse needs of students, CUET risks promoting rote learning and reliance on coaching centres, potentially undermining the educational experience, especially for those with limited resources. The article suggests that meaningful reform should recognise and address these systemic challenges.

Rakhi Gupta, Jaspreet Kaur, et al, Evaluating Student Perceptions and Awareness of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) in India, International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR) (2022). Accessible [here](#).

The study surveyed 2142 students about the new CUET. It found that while 36.1% of students supported CUET, only 33.8% were fully aware of its format. Many students enrolled in coaching programs due to the competitive nature of the exam, which also raised concerns about financial burdens on families. The shift to a common exam-based system aimed to create equal opportunities, but it also caused stress and anxiety among students, with 43.4% expressing concerns about mental health impacts. The study suggests that better awareness and preparation can help alleviate some of these issues and promote a more equitable education system.

Richard C. Atkinson & Saul Geiser, University of California, Center for Studies in Higher Education, Reflections on a Century of College Admissions Tests, Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.4.09 (2009). Accessible [here](#).

The article explores the evolution of standardised testing for college admissions over the past 100 years. Initially, the College Boards focused on assessing students' mastery of college-preparatory subjects. However, the introduction of the SAT in 1926 shifted the focus to measuring general analytic ability, and the ACT was created in 1959 as an achievement-based alternative. Over time, it has become clear that achievement tests, which evaluate students' knowledge and skills in specific subjects, are more effective and fairer indicators of college readiness. High school grades have consistently proven to be the best predictor of college success, outperforming standardised tests. The article argues that future college admissions should prioritise curriculum-based achievement tests, which align better with high school curricula, support rigorous academic standards, and offer a clearer pathway from high school to college.

The world's most important exam is flawed, The Economist (2018). Accessible [here](#).

This article was written in June 2018, after nearly 10 million young Chinese received their results from the *gaokao*, the world's largest and most crucial academic exam. This exam, while seen as a relatively corruption-free way to advance through hard work, imposes extreme stress on students who spend years cramming. The *gaokao* determines which university a student can attend, which is more important in China than their performance at university. The system is criticised for its heavy reliance on rote learning, neglecting skills like creativity and teamwork needed for a modern economy. While the government recognises the need for reform, many parents resist changes that could affect their children's chances of getting into top universities. Additionally, the *gaokao*'s meritocratic claims are undermined by disparities favouring wealthy city dwellers.

Chong-en BAI, Wei CHI, & Xiaoye QIAN, Do College Entrance Examination Scores Predict Undergraduate GPAs? A Tale of Two Universities, Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA Paper No. 48731 2013) Accessible [here](#).

The study investigates whether the Chinese National College Entrance Examination (CEE) scores can predict undergraduate GPAs using data from two universities in China with different rankings. The findings show that the CEE total score significantly predicts college academic success across all four years for both universities. The study also considers high school achievements and different admission routes, which are significant predictors of college grades. However, there is no consistent result regarding which specific CEE subject test scores predict academic performance in college. Overall, the research suggests that while CEE scores are useful, other factors such as high school performance should also be considered in university admissions to ensure a more holistic evaluation of student potential.

Isa E. Hafalir, Rustamdjan Hakimov, Dorothea Kübler, & Morimitsu Kurino, College Admissions with Entrance Exams: Centralized versus Decentralized, SFB 649 Discussion Paper 2016-003, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Accessible [here](#).

The paper explores two models of college admissions: centralised and decentralised. In the centralised model, students can apply to multiple colleges without additional cost, while in the decentralised model, students can only apply to one college. The study finds that high-ability students prefer the centralised model because it offers them a better chance of acceptance into a top college. Conversely, lower-ability students favour the decentralised model because it reduces competition. Theoretical predictions were tested through lab experiments, which largely supported the hypotheses but revealed some behavioural differences. For instance, students in the decentralised system exerted more effort than predicted, making the centralised model generally more favourable. The findings suggest that centralised admissions mechanisms may be more efficient and equitable, aligning with recent trends in countries moving towards such systems.

Robert Prince, The relationship between school-leaving examinations and university entrance assessments: The case of the South African system, *Journal of Education* (2017) Accessible [here](#).

The article examines the relationship between two key assessment examinations in South Africa: the National Senior Certificate (NSC) and the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs). The NSC is a norm-referenced exam used for high school graduation and university entry, while the NBTs are criterion-referenced tests that assess Academic Literacy, Quantitative Literacy, and Mathematics to gauge student readiness for university-level education. The study finds that there is a significant positive correlation between performance on the NSC and NBTs, especially in subjects like Mathematics and Physical Sciences. However, it also highlights notable differences. For instance, while NSC results can sometimes overestimate students' readiness, the NBTs provide a more precise indication of their academic skills. The Bland-Altman method, used in the study, shows that the NSC scores are generally higher than the NBT scores, indicating that the NSC may not fully capture the students' actual readiness for university. Overall, the study suggests that the NSC and NBTs should be seen as complementary tools for university admissions to better place students in appropriate programs and enhance educational outcomes.

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