

# Reimagining examinations

Disruptions caused by the pandemic call for innovative and holistic methods of assessment

N. ARUNACHALAM

For students, empowerment and acquisition of knowledge begin when they are properly evaluated in an appropriate examination system through a process that provides immediate results and success.

The online pattern of examination should not only judge intellectual development, as is prevalent in the present-day examination system, but it must also test the holistic development of students. It is the responsibility of every academician and authority to find the ways and means to conduct online examinations with reliable standards amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To successfully complete examinations during this period, constructive strategies, particularly in the online mode, should be employed, rather than calling for the cancellation of exams.

The Supreme Court had stated last year that students in higher education cannot be promoted without writing the final-year or terminal semester examinations, and a directive to the University Grants Commission (UGC) had said the States cannot promote students based on internal assessment or past performance. The court made it clear that the States could, under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, postpone final-year or final-semester exams, but they did not have the power to direct universities to promote students based on prior performance, as students' assessment was the prerogative of the UGC. The UGC rules clearly stated that a degree cannot be granted without examinations.

## Inclusive ways

It is now mandatory that final-year semester examinations should be conducted either online, offline, or a combination of both methods. Therefore, a new examination pattern should be crafted. It must include the assessment of educational objectives of understanding, critical and independent thinking, problem-solving ability, reflective thinking, skill development, and application of knowledge. In other words, a revised system should assess analytical and

application skills, rather than mere knowledge in a given time slot. This would enhance the quality and competence of students.

To restrict copying, answer scripts may be assessed using plagiarism software. With technological tools, monitoring and supervision of students during online examinations is not a difficult task. Many of the world's leading universities, some premier Indian institutes, and a few State universities conduct examinations online efficiently and fairly through suitable tools.

## Looking for alternatives

An alternative approach may be open-book examinations – it allows students to refer to textbooks or other source material while answering questions. Students are provided with questions before sitting for the exam, and they can even complete the test at home. This will help counter rote learning, which pervades the current examination system, while also sensitising students to real learning and analytical and application skills. Open-book examination is a well-accepted concept in many countries around the world.

Last week, the Supreme Court directed States that have cancelled Class 12 examinations of their respective Boards to spell out their assessment plans. It has also cleared the evaluation criteria proposed by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) for their Class 12 examinations.

Testing the knowledge gained and the presentation of that is the essence of education. As Jiddu Krishnamurti said, "It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education." Criticism should be accepted constructively in order to frame an innovative examination system. It is the foremost responsibility of policymakers and educationists to tackle the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Dr. N. Arunachalam is Professor of Lifelong Learning, Journalism and Mass Communication at Alagappa University*