

Reimagining examinations

A continuous, year-round testing model transforms exams from high-pressure national events into accessible public services

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Every year, India prepares for what may be the world's largest logistical exercise outside of elections: administering standardised tests. More than 20 million candidates appear for national entrance and recruitment examinations such as JEE, NEET, CUET, and numerous government recruitment tests. The scale is unprecedented: millions of students, thousands of examination centres, and an administrative apparatus involving testing agencies, educational institutions, state governments, police departments, cybersecurity experts, and transportation authorities, all expected to work in tandem to conduct a handful of examinations over a few days.

Yet, despite this massive effort, every examination season brings forth the possibility of all-too-familiar headaches: paper leaks, postponements, technical failures, and tremendous stress for students. So, rather than asking how to better secure the current system, India should ask: Should examinations continue to be conducted as one-time national events, or should they evolve into an always-available assessment system?

Scale is the obvious challenge in conducting mega examinations. The traditional examination model expects every candidate to take the same examination conducted simultaneously throughout the country. This approach appears equitable because everyone faces identical questions under similar conditions. However, a single examination conducted simultaneously for millions of students also creates a fragile system in which the failure of even a single node (or individual) within the process chain can compromise the entire examination and put millions of students at risk.

International testing has largely moved beyond this model. Exams such as the SAT, GRE, and GMAT are offered throughout the year at permanent testing centres. Instead of relying on a fixed question paper, these systems maintain extensive question banks of calibrated questions. Every candidate receives a different, but 'statistically equivalent', exam generated through sophisticated test assembly algorithms. Questions are pretested, calibrated using psychometric models, and selected to ensure comparable difficulty across years. Moreover, scores remain valid for three years.

Continuous, year-round standardised testing represents more than an administrative reform: it is a shift in philosophy. It transforms examinations from infrequent, high-pressure national events into accessible

public services that prioritise flexibility, security, and fairness.

A continuous testing model offers four clear advantages. First, it virtually eliminates the risk of a single leaked paper because every candidate receives a different question set. A localised disruption affecting one centre (or even one day) would have minimal impact, and the failure of a single examination session would no longer jeopardise an entire national admission process. Second, it reduces stress by allowing candidates to choose when to appear for an exam, rather than pinning their future on a single day that could be disrupted for reasons beyond their control. Third, testing loads are naturally distributed across the calendar instead of concentrating millions of candidates into a few days. Finally, extending score validity from one year to three years would reduce unnecessary repeat examinations while giving students greater flexibility in planning their higher education.

The transition is ambitious, yet achievable. India conducts several computer-based examinations, and the next logical step is creating a National Digital Assessment Network consisting of permanent examination centres across the country, supported by biometric authentication, AI-assisted surveillance, encrypted networks, and large calibrated question banks. Such an investment would be modest compared to the enormous economic and social costs of annual logistical mobilisation, and dealing with the fallout of repeated paper leaks and litigation. More importantly, much of this expenditure would create long-term public infrastructure rather than recurring annual costs.

The recent news reports suggest the constitution of a high-powered committee for examination reforms. This is a rare opportunity to redesign India's testing architecture. Several recommendations merit consideration: Transition to continuous testing, beginning with select computer-based examinations before expanding to larger national entrance tests; establish permanent, year-round digital testing centres; create a national repository of tens of thousands of psychometrically validated questions; extend the validity of examination scores to three years; and introduce independent statistical audits to ensure fairness across testing windows.

India transformed payments through UPI because it reimagined the system rather than merely improving existing processes. Standardised testing deserves the same bold thinking. A country aspiring to educate the world's largest student population cannot indefinitely rely on static, single-day, focused examination models. The objective should not be merely to conduct examinations more efficiently, but to create an assessment ecosystem that is resilient, technology-enabled, student-centric, future-ready, and works year-round.

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