

Online Delivery of Question Papers to Enhance Transparency in Evaluation

COVID 19 pandemic has forced our planners to revisit ways of delivering educational services once the lockdown is lifted. There are very valuable lessons to be learnt from the selfless sacrifices and struggles of public service systems which are in the forefront, actually in a hotspot, of struggle for survival such as community healthcare, police, civil administration, social organizations and the connecting threads of media and political leadership, by other public service sectors which are not under current focus. However, once the lockdown is lifted, they are bound to perform their part to help the society to move towards normalcy. Education is one such service where safe and transparent ways of teaching-learning processes and evaluation have to be devised to successfully deal with the challenges thrown up by the pandemic.

Academic instruction and evaluation are two main pillars of a healthy and vibrant education system/institution. Evaluation, the focus of this article, is the ultimate metrics of measuring the academic competence and skills acquired by a candidate and it is not an exaggeration that the recognition that reputed peer institutions and employers pay to the evaluation documents reflects the niche and brand name of the concerned institution.

Although, stringent measures are put in place to prevent malpractices in evaluation, the security shield is repeatedly pierced by vested interests, heightening the anxiety of the government about the future prospects of the students. One such vulnerable point is the conventional question paper delivery system presently in practice. Recent scams in PU exams and repeated episodes of question paper leaks in many university examinations are a pointer to the intensity of the damage caused by the compromises in the system. The damage is more dramatic and widespread in case of examinations for professional courses.

One solution to peg the loophole is to opt for secured online delivery of question paper to a large number of examination centers located over long distances from the main examination center. For instance, the Karnataka Examination Authority (KEA) had identified about 400 examination centers across the state for 2019-20. Under the current pandemic conditions, the number will have to be nearly doubled to strictly adhere to the healthcare mandate by the government. Similar

arrangements will have to be made by all examination authorities with a large number of examination centers such as PU Board, SSLC Board, and Universities etc. One common denominator for all these institutions is the workforce needed at each level of question paper delivery from the command center to the examination center. On previous occasions this workforce had some chinks in its armour whereas in the post pandemic lockdown period, the same work force, by its sheer size and multiple human contact points would a matter of concern for the implementation of the healthcare mandate. Online delivery of question paper could help to overcome these concerns if handled with technical and professional competence.

Online delivery of question paper procedures entail:

1. Establishment of secured online transmission facility located at the central offices
2. Actual transmission of question papers to examination centers in a set time frame (45 mts/1 hr before the examination starts)
3. Equipping the examination centers for super-fast copying facility with back up for electric supply failure.
4. The entire procedure should be embedded in a robust digital security system to ensure highest levels of safety and security
5. To accomplish the above, the central examination authority should have a competent technical staff to deal with the logistics involved.

To carry forward the reform the following are relevant:

1. Entrust the operations to a reputed professional agency for an initial period of 3 to 5 years in accordance with the e-tendering system.
2. Training of in house officials, technical staff and officers should be part of the contract with the chosen service provider
3. These in house trained personnel may take over the operations once the contract period is over
4. Equip the central examination centers with secured equipment and software for transmission of question papers to examination centers.
5. Equip all the examination centers with necessary computers, tools and trained personnel to handle the safe receipt, copiers and

distribution of question papers to candidates in stipulated a time frame

6. Introduce a stringent Process Auditing System to remove operational hurdles

7. It is advisable that the transition from the conventional to an online delivery regime should pass through a pilot project involving sample tests for a smaller number of centers and/or full scale mock trials to make the system robust and secure

8. A provision for Plan B should always be available in such cases of scaled up, state level operations

The above exercise needs to be undertaken with the understanding that full preparedness is an absolute necessity to usher in the transformation; cure should not be worse than the disease.

Relevance to NEP:

Online instruction and evaluation are the twin fundamentals for capacity building of all education institutions. Therefore, issues pointed out regarding online education are equally relevant to online evaluation as well.

Recommendations:

The state government should implement online capacity building of educational institutions and lead the state towards digitalization and modernization.

The initiative would positively reflect on the state which is globally renowned for its prowess in software industry. On this count, its educational institutions cant be seen as lagging behind in use of digital technologies; they need to be nudged to enter the digital era of 21st century

Online delivery of question papers to education institutions across the state by state level examination authorities (school examination board, KEA) would be seen in positive light on par with national examination authorities.

The measure would be helpful during prolonged lockdown periods due to various health and natural disasters.