

CAT and mouse games

Students pay the price for bad management

The disruption in the common admission test for the IIMs, which is being administered online for the first time, does no credit to either the managements of India's premier business schools or the IT firm which has been entrusted with the task of conducting the tests. When the disruption occurred on the first day of the tests staggered over ten days, a spokesman for Prometric, the IT firm responsible, described it as "isolated technical issues". However centres across the country were affected and the media reported confusion and frustration among students who could not offer the test. As one expert has argued, if 14 per cent of the centres and 10 per cent of the students have been affected, the disruption can hardly be called isolated. Problems over booting, logging in (password not accepted), system crashing midway and images not appearing, which the students faced, are all familiar to computer users. It would appear from this that the system set-up was simply not ready or adequate enough to handle the task at hand.

Experts have identified three aspects — technology, infrastructure and process. The technology used was obviously not meant to handle such large numbers as appear for tests in India. The fact that the same firm handles the online GRE tests used by American universities indicates that it was a problem of scale. If the technology is inappropriate then the infrastructure deployed is bound to be so. What is worse, the students who faced problems found the staff on duty inadequately trained to handle the problems that had come up. All this would have been unlikely if the system had been adequately stress-tested for both scale and robustness and

if enough systemic redundancy built in to take care of the load and more. While handling work of such nature "we do load testing and can simulate the number of users taking the test," asserts S Gopalakrishnan, managing director of Infosys, when commenting on the matter.

While a vendor can be changed if need be, it is not possible to order a new coordination committee of the IIMs which is ultimately in charge of the examinations. It could have done better than to blame the whole thing on the vendor as it is ultimately the institutes' responsibility to ensure that the appointed vendor delivers. For this, they have to ask for and satisfy themselves that the system configured has passed the stress tests which replicate the actual conditions, such as the number of users likely to turn up. Perhaps, most unfortunately, there has been no apology from the people responsible till the time of writing for what has happened. The episode unfortunately stresses the impression that the premier management schools of the country which get the best intake are themselves not so savvy at managing things.

While it is reasonable to expect that the glitches will be rectified, it is important not to learn the wrong lessons from this experience. Online testing, involving large numbers of candidates, is viable and workable and a great cost-effective solution to an operation that, when done manually, involves huge logistical challenges which both add to cost and the time taken. The IIMs and the technical fraternity in the country need to reassure everybody that if there is a ghost in the machine, then it has to be exorcised and it is not the machine — that is technology — which is at fault.