

A PARADIGM SHIFT to the online world

Today, most of the coaching for CAT as well as their tests are going online. *Kavitha Srinivasa* catches up with the latest trend in the competitive exams

CONSIDER this. 23,000 candidates appeared for an online test conducted in 37 centres across 11 cities in Gujarat. A network of 2,100 terminals was deployed for exams held for the admissions to Masters of Business Administration (MBA) and Masters of Computer Application (MCA) courses. Assessment company MeritTrac partnered with Gujarat Technological University, Government of Gujarat, to conduct the Gujarat Common Entrance Test (GCET 2009) online in July this year.

This first of its kind initiative proves a paradigm shift is happening, as competitive exams like All India Engineering Entrance Exam (AIEEE) exams intend to go online. However the Common Admission Test (CAT) for B-schools, which went online last week, didn't meet with success. The computer viruses attacked the CAT online exam delivery system, due to which 49 labs in 24 centres across 13 cities couldn't conduct the test. The technical snag extended to the second day, after which the date is being rescheduled for candidates who couldn't take the exam. Prometric Testing Pvt Ltd (Prometric India), a subsidiary of Prometric, signed a contract with the IIMs to conduct CAT. Around 2.4 lakh students had appeared for the CAT online exam held in 105 centres in 32 cities, all linked to a main server.

In spite of this poor management, one can't overlook the fact that these exams give students the option of answering queries online. It's also an indication that online tutoring is being accepted. "Online tutoring allows individuals to learn on their own as the content is designed in a simple manner so that students can grasp the concepts. Today animation and games are used to illustrate topics. Online companies provide a variety of test papers to coach students in phases unlike a typical coaching class where it becomes difficult for a student to cope when he misses a class," explained Srinikrishnamurthi, Managing Director, Expertus, a learning outsourcing company. National level coaching institutes like Brilliant Tutorials and Career Launcher have incorporated technology into their delivery model through online assessments, online doubt clearing forums, chat rooms for posing questions and getting immediate answers from experts. Coaching centers have graduated from using a blackboard to using a computer with a projector to use stu-

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dent-friendly measures like PowerPoint and videos. "Students who don't have good coaching centres in their vicinity, opt for online services. Coaching centers are reducing the cost of online classes since its 30 per cent-40 per cent less expensive when taught virtually. Being digital, it can be recorded and archived for later review. This helps students revisit their classes," said Harman Singh, founder-CEO, WIZIQ.com, a web platform for teachers-students to teach-learn live, online.

All this is done with an eye on job placements. Job placement coaching can be split into two aspects, the first being employability training on aptitude and soft skills and second, functional or technical training courses. The former is being initiated by colleges to help students fair better during the interview. The latter is left to the student to plug the skill gaps by taking up courses in banking, finance, sales or IT. "It's estimated that there are 5,000 coaching centres in the country. Today professional companies cater to students appearing for competitive examinations. We've developed online content which can be accessed from any part of the country," explained Krishnamurthi. For the college employability segment, Expertus has a

placement support portal which brings together the college, student and corporate on a single platform. It acts as a placement support solution for colleges, as placement departments interact with companies beyond their immediate geographical boundaries. However, the online system of conducting exams is not fully implemented across Indian universities. "In the higher education sector, annually 150-200 million exams are conducted, barring entrance exams. Annually, 5-7 million students take entrance tests. But the total number of entrance exams which go online is about 150,000-200,000," explained Madan Padaki, Co-Founder and CEO, MeritTrac.

Pariksha, MeritTrac's latest is an integrated examination management service offering supported by a network of 50,000 testing terminals in 185 cities across India. "Computer literacy is critical from a student's readiness perspective. A new exam format will also emerge from this, whereby students will have to showcase their intrinsic capabilities instead of rote learning," added Padaki.

With a few exceptions, almost all exams are held in an offline (paper-pencil mode), despite its limitations and constraints. Many universities are yet to address the challenges of Internet and user-friendly infrastructure. While technological snags need to be overcome, the learning industry in India is witnessing a growth. "The current market size of the learning industry is estimated to be around 50 billion USD and is expected to be around 70 billion USD by 2012. Besides online coaching, traditional coaching centres offer short term courses which cost a few thousand rupees, and long term programmes can set you back by a few lakhs," added Jamsheed Jasar, Manager - Everonn Kompass, part of Everonn Education Limited, which has set up virtual classrooms in India.

Though online teaching is being accepted, traditional coaching centres continue to attract students. "People still prefer the older style of classroom teaching. They need mentoring, motivation, inspiration and belief that they can crack it," explained Lakshmi Narayanan, Director - Sales and marketing, Onlysuccess Learning Technologies P Ltd, a training company.

Eventually how many coaching classes of competitive exams graduate to the online mode remains to be seen.

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