

Mouse got the CAT

1 Dec 2009, 0257 hrs IST, ET Bureau

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The glitches in the first online Common Admission Test (CAT) for the Indian Institutes of Management have put 5,000 students to much distress. This is unfortunate, but technical snags can be sorted out and the way forward remains online tests for all entrance exams. With the caveat that students must be given flexibility in when to take the tests.

Ideally, it should be possible for students to take the test throughout the year. Such a system will be in sync with the best international practice. The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) general test, to assess the advanced study potential of students enrolling in universities in the US, is online and round the year. This test is, however, paper-based in a few countries including China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan. The GRE subject tests, paper-based worldwide, are held thrice

a year. The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) too is computer-adaptive.

The test is conducted through the year and, hence, gives students several options from which to choose a convenient date. So is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). These tests are given 30-40 times a year on pre-determined dates at over 4,000 secure internet-based centres across the globe. Back home, Manipal University and Birla Institute of Technology & Science have been conducting online entrance exams over the past few years.

In Manipal, the university experimented with online tests to enrol post-graduate students who were fewer in number. It was later scaled up to cover students seeking admissions for undergraduate courses. Given that over 2.4 lakh students registered for CAT this year, Prometric, the agency entrusted with the task of conducting the online exam, ought to have had a backup plan and probably conducted mock tests.

Rural electrification and publicly-funded optical fibre networks in all parts of the country are complementary investments that the government must make, to remove the present elitist bias in computer access. As online testing becomes ubiquitous, felicity with the hardware should not be a differentiating factor for those being tested.

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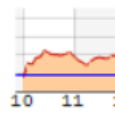
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