University examination guidelines that score low

By, Faizan Mustafa is Vice-Chancellor of NALSAR University of Law. Sughosh Joshi is a student at NALSAR. The views expressed are personal

Context

- The University Grants Commission’s (UGC) guidelines of July 6, 2020 on conducting final-year examinations for university students have created a storm.

- Delhi University students have termed the decision arbitrary and discriminatory, and have challenged it in the Delhi High Court.

- The guidelines state that performance in examinations is necessary for “reflection of competence, performance and credibility that is necessary for global acceptability.

Ground realities

- It is a matter of concern that our education system continues to be examination-centric.

- Most examinations in India merely test an ability to recall facts or information rather than an understanding of those facts or an ability to use them in practical situations.

- Most teachers too are not trained in setting good papers particularly for online open-book examinations.

- Certification through examination is important but cannot and should not be the sole goal of education.

- Hundreds of our students every year take unfortunate steps because of examination stress. A one size fits all cannot apply to our universities as we have all kinds of universities, i.e. unitary, affiliating, private and subject specific.

- The UGC was fundamentally meant to be the fund granting institution as is clear from its nomenclature. But the UGC Act 1956 does confer on it the power of ‘coordination and determination of standards’ in universities as well and, therefore, it has become the regulator of higher education.

- Today, the higher education sector is overregulated and underfunded.
The present government at the Centre wants to replace the UGC with a higher education commission.

Since universities are autonomous bodies, in these testing times this autonomy can help us in finding solutions keeping in view the specific situation of each university.

While the decision to cancel final year exams by few states has been justified by reference to other universities across the world, the systems that these universities are following are largely accommodative of students' concerns. In fact in foreign universities, each teacher has the freedom to devise his own evaluation mechanism.

The shadow of the virus

If the virus continues to spread, no university administration will be in a position to announce examinations, and students will continue to be in a limbo about their future.

In normal circumstances, examinations would have been conducted and either results announced or provisional certificates given by this time. These help students who are graduating confirm their admissions in institutes of higher education or report at their places of employment by furnishing proof of them having completed the course.

The current system does not provide for any such possibility.

Although universities which are smaller in size of student intake have started online classes, big traditional universities and the colleges affiliated thereto already lack the assurance of starting of the next academic year.

More discrimination possible

In case the infection does not subside (which seems to be the real prospect as per the World Health Organization’s latest communication), it would mean that the UGC either extends the deadline further or universities are forced to conduct online exams.

In the latter case, the UGC would have imposed a patently discriminatory policy on the students — issues with access to the Internet, electricity and study materials, as well as a lack of a study environment in homes would go
unaddressed — and it would only manifest the disparity prevalent in the education system.

- The elite, with the privilege of being unaffected by the crisis caused by the infection as well as its economic ramifications will be much better placed than their peers without the same level of assuredness.

- The whole purpose of university acting as an equaliser will be lost. Students from a humble background, from remote areas and those with doctors/health workers as parents or are coronavirus positive in families would be at a disadvantage.

- Finally, what is baffling is the idea that just one semester of examinations will be determinative of the integrity and value of a degree for which students would have worked hard for six to 10 semesters, and have also appeared for internal examinations for the sixth or 10th semester.

- It is difficult to understand why the last semester examination is so sacrosanct when our curriculum follows the cumulative rather than the hierarchical system.

**Way ahead**

- Unprecedented times call for bold steps and unprecedented decisions, and the UGC must act accordingly.

- Let the mental health of students and their anxieties be taken into account