

Relevance of National Eligibility Test in science

The recent order (D.O. No. F.1-1/2002 (PS) Exemp., dated 14 June 2006) from the UGC exempting those holding Ph D or M Phil from writing the National Eligibility Test (NET) examination was met with opposition from certain sections of the student community. Changing rules day-by-day to suit the ruling sections is not good for Indian science. In science, the NET examination is conducted jointly by CSIR and UGC and many aspirants work tirelessly to qualify in this prestigious examination, discarding their pursuits for a Ph D or M Phil degree.

There is an ongoing debate in the academic circles as to whether this examination would enhance the quality of science teaching or scientific research in India. Whatever may be the observations of our academic elite, there are serious lapses noticed in the CSIR-UGC examination.

First, the conduct of this examination has so far not been transparent. Candidates have observed that there have been serious mistakes in the question papers. As it is mentioned in the instructions that those found copying the questions would

be debarred from future examinations, how can a student lodge a complaint? The authorities should at least publish the answer keys before publication of the results, so as to make this examination more transparent.

Secondly, options for writing the examination either in English or Hindi does not provide an equal opportunity in a multilingual and pluralistic society like India. Since the common medium of communication in science in India is English, a highly competitive examination like this should only be in English. This will guarantee equal opportunity to all ethnic groups.

Thirdly, in life sciences, even if one qualifies in the NET examination, he/she is not permitted to join lecturership in subjects other than those studied in the basic degree he/she holds. So a zoology graduate with NET in life sciences cannot secure a position in a microbiology department or a botany graduate in the biochemistry department, although nowadays all life sciences courses have almost similar topics in their syllabi. The

authorities should assess whether the candidate is competent to take up the job rather than decide on the basis of his/her basic degree; and NET should be seen as a competency certificate in this regard.

The recent order from the UGC has created chaos among science students. With this new order, students with poor academic background but having a Ph D will get better opportunities. If UGC indeed wants to do justice towards students, it should at least make it mandatory that this new rule is only for those having good academic background, e.g. a minimum of 60% marks from tenth standard to postgraduate level for Ph D or M Phil degree holders. Otherwise we cannot guarantee equality and quality in scientific teaching and research.

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Plant identity crisis in Indian systems of medicine

The system of medicine developed by 'Ayurveda' has not been properly documented as far as the identity of resource plant is concerned. This knowledge has mostly passed through generations by inheritance within the family/students, due to which most of the ingredients of the Indian wonder drugs are not yet identified correctly, leading to production of less effective medicines. With the establishment of organizations like Central Council for Research in Ayurveda & Siddha and Indian Academy of Ayurveda, etc. the condition has improved to some extent

but the job of establishing correct identity of the resource plant is still not proper. There are many examples, like the use of American Ashok (*Polyalthia longifolia*) instead of 'Sita-Ashok' (*Saraca indica*) in preparation of 'Ashokarisht', confusion about the identity of 'Shankhpushpi', Brahmi, use of bark/leaves of *Abies densa* instead of *Taxus wallichiana* in medicines for treatment of cancer, confusion about the identity of 'Nagarmotha' (*Cyperus scariosus*), etc. All the 84 ingredients of the drug 'Chyawanprash' have not been identified yet.

All these facts indicate the necessity of a more systematic, collaborative and scientific approach and strict quality control, during the production of Ayurvedic medicines. Only then, will the Indian System of Medicine regain its past glory.

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